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Vagabond Joe, The Young Wandering Jew; OR, Plotting for a Legacy.

BY OLL COOMES.

CHAPTER I.

VAGABOND JOE.

THE village school was in session in the little frontier settlement of Fort Dodge. Behind the desk, "deep scarred with raps official," Cyrus C. Carpenter presided with that calm, manly dignity which in after years distinguished him in the gubernatorial chair of the State.

The school numbered about twenty scholars—boys and girls—ranging all the way from the child in his A, B, C's, to the lad and lass of seventeen, and even older.

Most of the scholars were the children of people who had recently moved in from the Eastern States; consequently they were possessed of some education when they came.

For a youth of the border, Mave Conrille was considered a pretty fair scholar, having attained to McGuffey's Third Reader, Ray's First Arithmetic, and the study of Pinneo and Mitchell. He was a youth of eighteen, though he really looked and appeared older; and some always believed he was.

Mave was in the employ of "Newbold & Carew, Land-Agents and Speculators," as a kind of an office boy and clerk. As land-agents in those days were generally regarded as "claim-jumpers," and swindlers in general, Newbold & Carew were not as highly respected by the grown people of the settlement as was consistent with a successful business. And, naturally enough, the reflections cast by the parents upon the firm, were plainly betrayed in the feelings of their children toward Mave Conrille.

It is true, the boy was not to blame for what his employers did; but then he was by nature a cross and domineering fellow among his schoolmates, and made no effort to gain the good-will and confidence of any of them, except Myrtle Gray, a blue-eyed, flaxen-haired little maiden of some sixteen summers, and the idol of every boyish heart in the school.

The first month of the school had passed with nothing to break the monotonous routine of daily study. This was unusual for a frontier school. The teacher had not been turned out by unruly boys, as was customary in those days. Mave

Conrille had suggested the idea to some of his mates, but they never could muster up courage enough to make the attempt. In fact, there was something in the face of the modest pedagogue possessed of an awesome power calculated to command fear and respect in the most obstinate and rebellious natures.

The Monday morning of the fifth week, however, promised a change in the hitherto unvarying routine of mental labor. The scholars expected some real, live fun, in the acquisition to their number, of an eccentric young genius familiarly known as Vagabond Joe, the Young Wandering Jew. He was a trapper boy of some seventeen years of age, and was notorious for his kind, pleasant and rollicking spirit, and odd,

whimsical and inimitable expressions acquired by association with hunters and trappers.

Vagabond Joe had no particular home, but wandered about from place to place—stopping awhile at one place and then another—always welcomed and petted wherever he went, until he had finally obtained the name of Vagabond Joe, the Young Wandering Jew. This was all the name he knew anything about. If he ever had any other, he had never heard it mentioned. His parentage was a dead secret to him, that he, nor any of those interested in him, could unravel.

Joe was naturally industrious and ambitious for one situated as he was. He had, by hard work and economy, laid up a snug little sum of money from the sale of peltries. He was bright and intelligent, and evinced a disposition to rise above the level of that class to which his name might be more properly applied. All who knew him loved him; and it was not strange that the better class of people took an interest in the young vagabond's welfare. And the result of this interest was in their inducing him to attend school.

Joe was now making his home with an old hunter's family living some five miles from the settlement up the river; and as long as the skating remained good, Joe promised to be punctual in his attendance at school, for by this means he could make the trip very easily.

And so his coming was eagerly watched for by the scholars who had repaired to school earlier than usual that Monday morning. They stood upon the bluff overlooking the Des Moines with their anxious, eager eyes turned up the stream; and when at length a lithe figure glided into view around the bend of the river, a cry of mingled delight and excitement burst from their lips.

"That's him! that's him!" shouted a little, tow-headed fellow, fairly dancing with delight.

"Yes, that's Joe," added another.

"What of it?" asked Mave Conrille, sullenly, as if jealous of the interest centering in Vagabond Joe. "You make as much fuss over that young vagabond's coming as though it were President Franklin Pierce."

"Well, I don't care," replied little tow-head; "Joe's a jolly good feller, and that's more than you are."

"See here; don't sass me, boy, or I'll cuff your ears like blazes," replied Mave, turning upon the chalk-line.

"Do it, if you dare, and I'll tell the teacher; he'll make you toe the chalk-line."

Mave Conrille, enraged beyond endurance, started toward the boy, when the blue-eyed Myrtle Gray interposed, saying:



VAGABOND JOE.

"Mave, you wouldn't hurt little Dick, would you?"

Mave stopped, as if ashamed of himself. The gentle rebuke of Myrtle touched his pride, and he tried to conceal his real feelings behind a forced smile.

Meanwhile, Vagabond Joe came sweeping down the river, the clear ring of his skates on the ice being audible now on the sharp December air. He finally halted at the foot of the bluff opposite the school-house, and removing his skates, ascended the bank where the little group of school-children were awaiting him.

He was warmly clad in a new suit of dark-gray cloth, a short, wolf-skin overcoat, a coonskin cap and mink mittens.

A glow of youthful joy sparkled in his bright blue eyes, and a smile of boyish pride wreathed his lips. The keen, frosty air, and his recent exercise, had imparted an unusual ruddy glow to his cheeks, and thrilled his whole form with a corresponding vigor.

"Good-morning, young folks," he said, in a clear, pleasant voice, as he approached the scholars.

"Rather a cold morning, I should say," replied Mave Conrille.

"Oh, this is just good and healthy-deelightful," replied Joe. "I like it sharp enough to pull my ears and tingle my nose. Besides, it makes skating splendiferous. Gracious! if I didn't come a-booming down the river—fairly made the ice smoke, I come so fast!"

The scholars laughed heartily at his exaggerated remarks; and in a moment he was surrounded by a lot of eager, curious young faces peering into his own radiant countenance, and anxious ears ready to drink in his unique talk that seemed to flow as easily and pleasantly as a rippling rill.

Mave Conrille regarded the smiles that Myrtle Gray bestowed upon Joe with an envious look.

The little party stood chatting on the riverbank until the rap of the teacher on the door was heard calling them to their books.

Vagabond Joe followed the scholars into the school-room, removed his cap and great-coat and hung them on the wall-pegs, then seated himself on a long, low bench among the small boys and drew from his pocket a green-backed Webster's Elementary Spelling-Book.

The teacher saw that all eyes were centered upon the new scholar; that a smile lurked upon every face, and that the whole school was all aguiver with pent-up emotions that were ready to burst forth into laughter at the least provocation.

After all had become quiet, and the teacher had called the attention of the scholars to their books, he went to where Joe sat and said:

"Well, Joe, I am pleased to see you here this morning."

"And I'm pleased to be here, general," replied Joe, "though I'm awfully afraid I can't stand this confinement."

"You will soon become accustomed to it, Joe," responded the teacher. "It goes a little hard at first, I know; but, Joe, what is your full name? I want to enter it with your age on my register."

"Vagabond Joe's my full name," was the prompt reply.

The scholars burst into a peal of laughter. The teacher smiled.

"What is the rest of your name, Joe? Vagabond is only a nickname," continued the teacher. "It must be Joe Smith, or Joe Somebody."

"No it arn't, general; Vagabond Joe's all I know anything about—all I ever heard. That's enough for present use."

"Then you have no recollection of your parents' names?"

"No, sir; I don't know as I ever had any parents."

"Well, then tell me how far you are advanced in your studies, will you?"

"Yes, sir; I know every letter in the book from 'a' to 'izzard,' and can spell 'incompatibility' backwards, and read the story of the farmers and the bulls slick as slidin' down on ice."

Again the scholars laughed.

"Well, you commence at 'Baker,' and take three columns for your first lesson," said the teacher.

"All right, teacher; but you'll have to guide me, for I'm jist as ignorant of a school-house as a Misquaque is of Dutch. But when it comes to trappin' beaver, or sendin' daylight through a buck, I can hoe my row with any of them;" and the youth finished this affirmation with a nod that was evidence of his earnestness.

"Well, I will instruct you, to begin with," explained the teacher. "You are to study over your lesson repeatedly in silence. You must

speak to no one, unless it is to me, in the meantime. In two hours we'll have recess, then you can go out and have a few minutes' exercise in the open air."

"Two hours' silence!" exclaimed the youth in apparent astonishment; "great misery, teachery! that much silence'll ruinate me! I'll go as stark mad, I know, as one of Neutral Bill's rip-roarin' jibbernainosays, of which he tells."

The teacher colored to the very temples and bit his lip to keep back his emotions; but the merriment of the scholars broke beyond restraint, and the whole house was set a-laughing.

The teacher promptly rapped for silence, and when order had once more been restored, he said:

"Well, Joe, you must try and keep still—do the best you can. That is all I can ask of you."

Joe did keep still and orderly. He soon learned the "order of business," and proved one of the most studious and obedient scholars in the school. But the moment he was loose the very spirit of fun and frolic burst from his lips. He seemed to inspire the very atmosphere around him with his own joyous nature. His delight was to lead his comrades in an imaginary chase, skate upon the river, or ramble through the woods. He was the first in at the teacher's call, and the first out when school was dismissed.

The scholars all liked Joe very much, except Mave Conrille. Joe possessed a sort of rude, yet natural, gallantry, that won the admiration of the girls. This Mave could not stand. To see pretty Myrtle Gray, whom he adored, smiling upon the young vagabond stung him to the very heart.

Mave could not conceal this, and from day to day it was noticed that he became more distant and surly toward Joe. He tried every way possible to pick a quarrel with him. He believed that by bringing about a quarrel, and giving the young gallant a sound thrashing, Myrtle's regards for the little vagabond would not be so strong. But all his attempts failed. Joe could out-general him in the use of words, and parry his tongue-thrusts in a skillful manner.

One morning Vagabond Joe repaired to school a little ahead of time, though he was never known to be behind. When he entered the house he found the teacher had not yet arrived; but before a roaring fire burning on the hearth sat Mave Conrille and Dan Powers engaged in a secret conversation.

They started up when Joe came in, and looked quickly around, as though possessed of a guilty conscience.

"Glad you've come, Joe," said Mave; "we've got some rich old fun on foot."

Joe advanced to the fire, pulled off his cap and mittens, and extending his hands to the warm glow of the fire, answered:

"I'm your persimmon when it comes to fun, you can bet your last pelt. What's up? a deer-hunt? rabbit-chase? or what?"

"No, none of them; we're talkin' about barring out the teacher," said Mave.

"What for?" asked Joe, in surprise.

"Because he won't 'treat,'" was the reply.

"Treat us? Great Peter, hasn't he treated us like gentlemen?" replied Joe, rather contemptuously.

"He has in one way; but then it's customary for teachers back in Indiana to treat the scholars to apples, candy and nuts, and such things, once every term."

"Oh, git out with baby-sweets. I've got all the nuts I want at home—gathered them—real old shell-barks—last fall by the bushel. Besides, I don't believe there's an apple or plug of candy in the settlement. He might fix you up a little sugar in a gourd, though."

"See here! do you mean to insult me?" Conrille exclaimed, indignant at Joe's remark, and ripe for a disturbance.

"No, oh, no!" replied the boy, sarcastically; "but then, as teacher's treated me kindly, and helps me to learn something, I'm not going to help bar him out. And then that's not all of it, either."

"Well, what's the rest of it?"

"I'll put a bee in the bonnet of the first boy that attempts it. That's what's hurtin'."

"You self-conceited young vagabond! You'd better spell 'able' first," retorted Mave, squaring himself in a scientific and threatening manner before our hero.

"A-b-l-e, able," spelled Joe, and simultaneously his lithe form shot across the room, and his fist was planted in Mave Conrille's face.

The blow staggered Mave, who, reeling backward, fell over a seat, striking his head upon the floor and partially stunning him.

At this juncture, young Powers came to Mave's

assistance, in a rather threatening tone and hostile attitude; and before he was aware of the fact, Vagabond Joe had floored him.

Young Conrille had, by this time, regained his feet, and seizing the heavy wooden poker, standing in the corner by the jamb, essayed to strike his antagonist. But the latter eluded the unwieldy club by leaping nimbly aside; and the impetus with which the blow was aimed, carried the heavy bludgeon from Mave's hand across the room. Now was Joe's opportunity, and bounding across the cabin he grabbed up the poker and turned upon his enemies, who, seeing their danger, beat an inglorious retreat from the room, leaving Joe master of the situation. But, as Joe attempted to follow them out, he found they had the advantage of him; and so he retreated into the house, closed the door and drew in the latch-string.

Mave and Dan returned and demanded admittance, but were refused. They pounded and kicked the door in a manner that threatened its destruction. But Joe would not budge; and, failing to force an entrance there, they walked round to the window and intimated their intention of entering the cabin at this opening.

"Come on if you want fun," retorted Joe, in an exceedingly provoking manner; "I'm king of this castle now, and if you want to scale the walls, jist crack in, my brave crusaders."

"You confounded young outcast and drapin's of filth! you'd better not let me git a holt of you again, or I'll beat the daylights out of you!" returned Mave, white with impotent rage.

"Come in, why don't you?" sneered the trapper school-boy; "come in and bar the teacher out. He'll soon be here, for it's most school time. Or, jist poke your snooks in at that winder if you want to feel the fur fly. Come in and be brave boys! Don't stand out there champin' yer bits like colicky mules, and feedin' your wrath on the thoughts that I'm only one to two."

The two boys stood at the window until satisfied that they could not gain an entrance by force or intimidation, when they finally went around the house and into the woods to consult.

As Joe could not see them, however, he supposed they had crept around to the door to await the coming of the teacher; and, as he stood there debating with himself what course to pursue, he was suddenly startled by a soft rap upon the door.

"Who's there?" he demanded.

"Why, it's me, Joe," was the reply, and in the gentle voice Joe recognized the presence of Myrtle Gray, and at once opened the door.

As the maiden entered the room she noticed the overturned benches, and general disorder of the place; but she mistrusted nothing of the truth, as she assisted Joe to put things in their proper order.

One by one the scholars came in, and presently the teacher arrived; but Mave and Dan did not put in their appearance.

School took up, and the labors of the day commenced. The teacher noticed that Joe was somewhat restless, but never dreamed of the cause.

All went quietly along as usual until about eleven o'clock, when the three school-directors, accompanied by Mave and Dan, entered the school-house unannounced.

The teacher was somewhat surprised by this unceremonious intrusion; and he saw at a glance that trouble was brewing—especially when he saw Mave's right eye was swollen shut.

"Gentlemen," said the teacher, after recovering from his momentary confusion, "I am really pleased to see you here. Be seated, gentlemen, here by the fire."

"Mister Carpenter," said the president of the school-board, Bildad Meeks, "we have come down here on official business connected with this ere school. It is our great aim to promote the interest of our settlement by edycatin' our children, and fosterin' the principals of morality and truth, as are inculcated in the catechisms. If you can't keep strict harmony and peace by moral suasion, Mr. Carpenter, do it by more forcible means. Lay on the bud—lay on, say we all. I alers larnt as fast ag'in when I got whooped at school like sixty. I tell ye, it brightens up a boy's ideas to beat all git out."

"I am sure, Mr. Meeks, and gentlemen," said the teacher, ignorant of what the president of the school-board was driving at, "I have had no reason for the use of corporal punishment in my school."

"You haven't? then you don't know what happened this mornin' down here?"

"I am totally ignorant of anything unusual having occurred."

"Wall, then, I'll tell you," said the president, squaring himself on the end of the bench, and removing his hat for the first time since he had entered; "you see that boy's eye, don't you? Wall, now, that kind of conduct can't be tolerated here, Mr. Carpenter; no, sir, it can't be tolerated. This mornin' when them boys came here, peaceably and quiet, they were set onto by that young scraggrace of a Vagabond Joe, and most cruelly treated. Mave Conrille, you can see, Mr. Carpenter, must have got a thunderin' belt over the eye to make it swell up that way. It might 'a' killed him deader'n a nit."

"I am astonished by this news, Mr. Meeks," said the teacher, betraying deep regret.

"In course the young savage wouldn't 'a' told you if he'd killed a boy," continued the president; "but I tell ye, sir, such conduct is unbecomin' to a civilized school and Christian people. It's our opinion that that 'ere young jackal can't be any more civilized than the Ingins with which he's 'sociated so long; and it's no use wastin' money onto him."

"I am really astonished, gentlemen," said the teacher, "and I am sure no one regrets this trouble more than I."

"Teacher," said Joe, "I didn't like to say anything about it on your account; but then we did have a regular rough-and-tumble fight; and it was all 'bout you. Mave and Dan wanted me to help bar you out, and I kicked against it; and from that we got into a fight."

"I am sorry, very sorry, Joe, to hear this," said the teacher.

"And so am I, teacher," replied Joe.

"You'll be more sorry afore you're through with it," put in the president of the school-board. "We'd or't to arrest you for 'salt and battery, but then we've concluded to come and, in the name and by the authority vested in us by the laws of the State, expel you from school. So you can jist git up and git right outen here forthwith. A boy like you ar'n't fit to 'sociate with children of this age."

"Yes, I see," said Joe, sarcastically, "that I should have lived in your young days; but then I couldn't help bein' born several years later."

"We don't want any 'pertinence," replied Meeks; "but we want you to climb out of here at once."

"Well, if I must, I must," said Joe, regretfully; "but the fact of it is, them boys begun the fuss, and I licked them. They're the ones to blame; but I s'pose it's because I've got no friends in the world, and am all alone, that I've got to be kicked around like an old shoe."

"You have got friends, Joe," said a soft, half-choked voice behind him; and Myrtle Gray's words sent a thrill of hope and courage through his youthful heart. He assured her by a kind look, for he was too full for utterance.

The lad rose to his feet to depart, but tarried. He seemed desirous of saying something. The teacher remonstrated with the board, but that august body of wise heads was inexorable.

"The vagabond must leave here, and that at once—let him go back to his element—his gun and dogs and wolves and elks on the Neutral. Them's all he's fit to 'sociate with."

"Them's all," the other two members of the board added.

Vagabond Joe closed his elementary, while tears gathered in his eyes. He placed the book in his pocket, and swallowing back the great lump in his throat, glanced around him as though he wanted to speak. But when he saw most of his schoolmates' eyes filled with tears, and heard one or two little fellows sobbing behind their books, his powers of speech failed him.

There was that in Vagabond Joe's nature which made the children love him, wild and reckless as he was. He was a center of attraction to them. His kind disposition; his utter contempt for low, cunning mischief; and his general inclination to make all happy and pleasant, had won a place in nearly every scholar's heart. On the other hand, he had conceived an affection for the children deeper than he had ever dreamed of until he found he must part with them.

The youth put on his overcoat and mittens, and with his cap in hand, advanced to the door, which was held open by one of the school-board. As he was about to cross the threshold, he paused, and turning to the teacher said:

"I hate most awfully to go, teacher; but, then, what I have learned here they can't take from me. I'm goin' to keep on studying, now that I've got the kink of it, until I can read and write and talk better 'n some presidents I know. I know you've got as big a heart in you, teacher, as ever hopped for joy or throbbed with sorrow, and that's why I got into trouble fightin' for

you. And some of these days, boys," he continued, addressing the little boys, "I'll come down about noon-time and waller with you little codgers in the snow, chase the rabbit, and have some old-fashioned fun."

The faces of the boys brightened up, and the teacher said:

"Yes; I presume there'll be no objections to your visiting the school."

"All right, I'll come; but, I'd nearly forgot; next Saturday I'm going to guide a hunting-party of gentlemen up on the North Lizard; and if I should be so lucky as to kill a deer, I'll send you a quarter, teacher."

"Thank you, Joe, thank you; but you will have to be careful. Ishtahaba and his band of Indians, they tell me, are encamped up there, and they are very threatening in their attitude toward the whites."

"I know it, teacher; but if they raise a disturbance," Joe replied, with a mischievous sparkle of the eyes, "we'll send down here for—for, well, authority to come up and expel the rioters—turn 'em out, you know."

"I'll have no impertinence here, sir," exclaimed Meeks, feeling the sting of the youth's sarcasm.

"Well," said Joe, and the moisture again welled up into his eyes, "good-by, teacher, and good-by schoolmates."

He turned and walked out, and the next moment the school-house door had shut from view of the children's tearful eyes the form of brave Vagabond Joe.

CHAPTER II.

THE HUNTERS' CAMP.

In the edge of the woods on the bank of the North Lizard river, and some twenty or thirty miles west of Fort Dodge settlement, stood eight canvas tents, of different sizes. Among the trees surrounding them, hung a large number of dressed deer, wolf-skins and other evidences of a hunter's temporary encampment.

Five of these tents stood close together, and were the quarters of six amateur hunters who had come from the eastern part of the State for a season of hunting upon the Lizard rivers and their tributaries. They had journeyed to Fort Dodge with teams; and securing the services of Vagabond Joe as a guide, they left their conveyances at the settlement, and made the rest of their journey upon foot, carrying their camp equipage upon hand-sledges, and following the course of the river upon the ice.

The other three tents, situated some thirty rods south of Joe's party, composed the camp of a party of Fort Dodge settlers who, under the guidance of an old hunter named Neutral Bill, had come to the hunting-grounds of the Lizard to lay in a supply of venison for the season. Among this party was the Honorable Bildad Meeks, president of the school-board.

Success awaited the efforts of Vagabond Joe's party upon every hand. The weather of the first few days had been favorable, and game abundant. They could have soon supplied their greatest wants, but as the party was there as much for pleasure as profit, they were in no hurry to wind up their sport and get away.

As the time passed on, however, Vagabond Joe advanced a prognostication that created some concern among his friends. They had found that their young guide was possessed of more than ordinary intelligence for one of his years. He seemed in doubt about nothing, at the same time careful, and went at the work before him with the easy, natural self-assurance of one familiar with his duty and its surroundings.

Joe prophesied "falling weather"—in other words, a storm. Still his friends, ignorant of what a storm on the wilds of the North-west fully implied, made no attempt to escape from their exposed situation. On the contrary, they strengthened their position against the invasion of cold and storm, determined to remain there until they had fully gratified their love for the sport.

Vagabond Joe would not insist on their leaving, for all he felt that other dangers, besides those to be expected from a severe storm, hung around. He had discovered, quite recently, that Indians were in the vicinity, and he knew they belonged to Ishtahaba's band.

The followers of Ishtahaba, numbering over two hundred warriors, were made up of the remnants of different tribes of the North-west. It was really a band of criminals—outcasts of the various tribes—holding themselves amenable to no one, and claiming no tribal relationship. Robbery and murder, without distinction of color, made this band of Bedouins of the North-

west a terror to small settlements, and especially to hunters and trappers.

It is true, the Indians' right and title to this country had long since expired; but the military arm of the government had been kept so diverted that Ishtahaba, for the time being, had been enabled to operate along the frontier with impunity. While troops were stationed at Fort Dodge, he kept a respectable distance from them; but as soon as the military post had been removed to Fort Ridgely, he came back into the vicinity of his old haunts, and for awhile kept the settlers along the Des Moines and lakes in a constant fever of excitement.

Through fear of skulking thieves and wolves that would not hesitate to invade the precincts of their camp, the hunters always left a guard to watch things. This guard was chosen by lot; for it was a duty that none desired to perform.

On the fourth day it fell to Vagabond Joe's lot to remain on guard, and when his friends departed, he cautioned them to look out for danger, such as inexperience was liable to overlook. Joe was well versed in Indian habits and cunning, having spent most of his life with the Sacs and Foxes. He had even seen actual service with them against the Sioux ere the Neutral Grounds became a barrier between the antagonisms of the two relentless enemies.

The settlers under Neutral Bill, also, observed measures of precaution, and left one of their number to watch their camp. While he was upon duty, Joe discovered that Bildad Meeks had been detailed as guard that day; and, but for this fact, he would have gone down to the settlers' camp awhile. The trouble at school, however, was still fresh in the youth's mind, and so he concluded to let the president of the board" alone.

About noon Joe's prophecy as to the weather seemed in a fair way of being verified. The sky became overcast, and snow began to fall; but as the hours wore on the fall increased until the fury of a great snow-tempest seemed inevitable.

The ground was already covered with a foot of snow when this tempest began. This was damp and heavy, and was what was termed a "good hunting snow," having been very little drifted. But the wind was likely to destroy this favorable advantage, much to Joe's regret.

Out on the prairie this wind was already drifting the falling snow; but in the timber where the force of the wind was broken, it sifted down in clouds. Joe never saw it snow harder in his life. He could not see a hundred yards away; and, on this account, he became very uneasy about his friends. He was afraid they might become bewildered and wander away into danger. He was on the point once of going down and consulting with President Meeks upon the subject; but a second thought led to the conclusion that a man of his sage judgment would have little to say to a boy—especially one he had decided was not "qualified" to associate with other children.

So our hero sat down in the door of the tent to wait and watch the coming of his friends.

His thoughts became more gloomy and foreboding as the storm steadily increased.

The heavy shadows of the woods seemed to thicken.

Joe kept his watch while the icy fingers of the elements wove a sheet of white around him, and feathered the trees and bushes in robes of ruffled down plucked from the breast of the storm.

A hundred thoughts revolved through the youth's mind. That upon which he dwelt longest, was the little log school-house upon the banks of the Des Moines. It was the central object of his mind, but not of his heart. Foremost of all, in his affections, were the faces of pretty Myrtle Gray and the teacher; then followed remembrances of the scholars. One by one these loved ones came marching up in his memory, a grand little procession that love had stamped upon his mind and heart as indelible as life itself. But in the midst of this mental review, he was disturbed by a sound not altogether pleasant to his ears. It was the voice of Bildad Meeks rolling up heavily through the storm, engaged in singing the song of "Old Hundred."

"The old skeesicks!" muttered Joe, contemptuously; "he's afraid, else he wouldn't be singin' that way, as if to frighten the old de'il away. I'd ought to slip down there and pop a snowball into his presidential physiognomy. Great mollyhorns! wouldn't he raise Cain in Jericho? I don't believe in boys bein' mean to old folks; but then, boys have got some rights old folks had ought to respect. If I'm a vagabond, I

can't help it. The Lord made me, and if he done a bad job it's not the first, else *He* didn't make President Bildad. Gracious Peter! what's that mean?"

The dull report of a pistol-shot, and a yell came from the vicinity of the settlers' camp; but a deep silence followed.

"By larmy!" exclaimed Joe, tipping back his cap upon his head as if to relieve his hearing; "it must be there's something wrong down that way—leastwise, the president has stopped his melodious singin'. Mollyhorns! what if an Ingin has slipped up and plugged the old pumpkin?"

This thought seemed the offspring of an intuitive fear. He could not see the camp of his neighbors, owing to the blinding mist of snow between; but he had scarcely asked himself the question, ere the sound of voices, in angry altercation down at the settlers' tent, came to his ears in terrible distinctness.

He stood motionless and listened. He heard the unmistakable sounds of a scuffle; excited words and execrations from the lips of Bildad Meeks.

"By Sallyander! the president is tryin' to expel somebody from his tent," the lad mused; then as a savage yell came up from his neighbors' camp, he started with an exclamation of fear: "by Jericho! the Indians have attacked the old codger; and he's all alone. That'll never do."

Forgetting all the past in an instant, Vagabond Joe took up his rifle and started to Meeks's assistance, but as he stepped from the door of the tent he was confronted by half a dozen shrouded figures that disputed his further passage.

They were Indians; this the lad saw at a glance, although the snow, clinging, like ragged clots of cotton, to their clothes, wrought such a change in their looks as to give them the appearance of storm-fiends.

"Hullo, red-skins!" exclaimed the boy guide, endeavoring to conceal his emotions.

"Waugh!" returned the Indians, shrugging their shoulders, and shaking the snow from their clothes.

"Quite a storm, isn't it, red-skins?" continued Joe.

"Good storm," answered an Indian.

"How comes you fellers down here so fur from home?"

"Come for you!" was the laconic reply, given in good English.

"But, followers of the great Ishtahaba, I'm engaged," Joe responded with a tinge of sarcasm in his tone.

"You must go with us all the same. You are upon our hunting-grounds and shall suffer for trespassing," answered the spokesman of the party.

At this juncture two other Indians came up with Bildad Meeks in custody, his hands bound at his back, and a rope around his neck by which he was led like an animal. The old man seemed speechless with terror, yet was panting like an overworked ox.

"Hullo!" exclaimed Joe; "how's this, president? Seems the red salamanders have got the heels of you, this time. They've no respect for officials, have they? Why didn't you expel them, as you did me?"

"Vagabond Joe," said the old captive, with a dolorous whine, "you should not make light of such things."

"It's no laughing matter, I assure you," admitted Joe, "but then you must grin and bear it, president. It's nothin' compared with the sufferin' of the martyrs, is it?"

"Confusticate you, boy! I believe you are in league with these red devils!" declared Meeks, his rage getting the better of his judgment.

Further words between Joe and Meeks were here cut short by an Indian advancing and taking hold of Joe rather roughly.

"Keep your paws off of me, old tatterdemalion, or you'll git your solar system knocked out of kilter. I'll let you know that I'm no daisy to be plucked off by such a killposey, rag-rack as *you be!*" exclaimed Joe, jerking away from the Indian and drawing a pistol upon him.

"Now then, jist crowd on that and see if I don't scoot somethin' like a sharp pain thro' your natomy. I'll let you know you're foolishin' with dang'rous explosives."

The Indians were astonished by this unexpected resistance on the part of the youth; but their surprise turned to excitement and they at once closed upon the boy. The latter fired his pistol, then a regular scuffle ensued. Like an eel Joe eluded their grasp and for a time gave them a lively fight; but he was finally compelled to yield to overwhelming numbers and was

made prisoner. But his capture had cost his captors one of their warriors. The red-skins did not plunder the tents. With their two captives and dead comrade they had all they could well get away with; nor did they stop to destroy the tents, for every moment was of the utmost importance to them in getting away.

The prisoners were hurried northward with merciless cruelty. Vagabond Joe was wiry and supple, and possessed of as much endurance as his captors; but Meeks soon began to show signs of failing strength, and his appeals for mercy were regarded with blows and jeers of mockery and derision.

Fortunately for the old man, however, they reached camp about dark. This camp was only a temporary arrangement located in the head of a deep gully or "washout" in a narrow valley on the margin of the woods. The "washout" was a long narrow channel about ten feet deep. It had been cut there by the gradual wear of water flowing from several springs further up the ravine. But all was now frozen up, and the channel perfectly dry and affording an admirable shelter. The savages had stretched blankets across from bank to bank and pinned the edges fast, thereby roofing over enough of the channel to answer their need of protection. And it made a real cosy camp with the earth for walls upon the three sides.

A fire was lighted at the upper end of this camp, the smoke escaping through a water crevice on the side.

Meeks and Vagabond Joe were seated on one side under the slightly shelving bank and bound to huge roots that had been laid bare by the washing away of the earth.

Neither of the captives could form the faintest conception of what their fate was to be. That their captors intended to remain there was evident from the dispositions they made for that express purpose, by laying in a supply of fuel and patching up the holes in the roof of their camp.

Joe studied the situation closely. He saw that the Indians were the worst characters of Ishtahaba's band; and that the one directing the movements of the party, and otherwise manifesting authority, was a young war-chief named Red Hand. He could not have been over twenty years of age, and although a little under medium size, he was wiry and agile as a panther. Red Hand had already made a record by his cruelty against his red neighbors and white settlers. This Joe knew, and consequently entertained little hope of mercy at his hands.

There was one white man among the Indians. This Joe discovered by the man's voice and movements, notwithstanding his disguise. And there was something about the renegade that struck him as being familiar; but despite his efforts, Joe was unable to penetrate the man's disguise.

Shortly after their arrival in camp Red Hand and this renegade stepped aside and entered into a secret consultation. Joe endeavored to catch the drift of their conversation; but in this he failed. He was satisfied, however, by the glances of the young chief that he and Meeks were the main object of their conference.

Outside, night had settled down, wild and tempestuous. The snow had ceased to fall, but the wind rising, swept across the plain, driving the fallen flakes in blinding clouds before it.

The lower end of the camp was open, and the Indians saw that the snow was drifting into the "washout" below at a rate that threatened to soon fill the channel to the top, and block the passage from the camp. The roof of skins, however, protected the interior of the red-skins' retreat, though now and then an eddying gust dashed a cloud of crystal flakes inside from below.

North and east lay an interminable prairie where the caprices of the storm ran spirit free. Westward stood the deep, dense wood, over and against which the wild winds beat and surged with the unbridled fury of ten thousand demons. The roof of the "dugout," for such the camp of the Indians would really be termed in western phraseology, swayed up and down under the tread of the storm-king.

Fine particles of snow sifting down through the holes in the covering, glittered and glistened like a shower of diamond sands in the ruddy glow of the camp-fire.

Venison was brought out and roasted and eaten by the savages. They offered their captives some, but both declined to eat.

The hours wore slowly on. Deep and sultry the wind swept down the plain and rumbled over the roof of the dugout. Joe watched the white stream pouring over the bank just outside of the camp like an endless waterfall.

A strange smile lit up his boyish face as he saw the ditch slowly but surely filling up—slow to him for the moments now seemed like minutes. He grew restive and finally addressed his fellow captive:

"President, this is more than we bargained for, isn't it?"

Bildad Meeks answered in a deep groan.

"But it's only a foretaste of what's to come," Joe continued.

"What do you mean, Vagabond?"

"Oh, I mean this storm 'll weave you and me a winding-sheet."

Again the chief officer of the school-board groaned in spirit; but his anguish soon turned to indignation, and he broke forth:

"I wonder what in the fire and nation the boys are doing that they don't come and help us out of this?"

"I reckon they've all they can do to look after themselves," replied the boy; "but, president, something's comin' now."

The last words were spoken in a whisper, for he noticed the Indians busy loading their pistols.

Presently Red Hand and two of his warriors came up, and releasing Joe, bade him rise to his feet. The worst was coming and Joe knew it. Each of the Indians had a pistol in his hand.

Red Hand quietly informed Joe that they were going to use him as a target—that something must be done to pass the long winter night. He ordered the young trapper to stand up against the bank facing the marksmen, at the same time giving him the cheerful assurance that it was not their intention to kill him but just see how close they could shoot to his head without hitting him.

The red-skins had removed the lad's bonds in hopes that his freedom would lead him into some rash act that would be a good excuse for slaying him. Joe saw through their murderous game at once. They knew the boy could not escape, for the gully below was now filled to the very top with drifted snow, which had, also, walled up the open, or lower end of the camp. They were completely screened from the outside world and its storm. Their light could not be seen; neither could their pistol-shots be heard afar.

While the preparations for Joe's torture were being made, the youth's eyes and brain were busy.

"I say, smut-faces," he finally said, in an expostulating tone, "I'm sure the night'd pass all the more interestin' to me if you'd let me have every other shot."

"The pale-face is the prisoner of Red Hand; already he has slain one of my braves," said the young chief.

"Well, then, I s'pose you calculate to salt me, do you? ef you do, I don't want any fuzz-guzzin' 'bout it," said Joe; "you know I done the fair thing by your brave—didn't keep him foolin' round, but plugged him right through and let him light out for the happy hunting-grounds."

"Let the pale-face be silent," commanded Red Hand, indignantly; "and take his place against the bank."

"One more request, red-skin," persisted Joe; "let me warm my hands, for they're nighly froze."

He advanced toward the fire as he spoke. Every Indian had his eyes fixed upon him.

"Oh, but this is a glorious fire, Red Hand," Joe said, "but they tell me that when a bad—Oh, great murder! look comin' in younder, redskins!"

He raised his finger, and pointed in an excited, tragic manner toward the upper end of the ditch. Mechanically every Indian turned his eyes in the direction indicated; and, at the same instant, Vagabond Joe sprung over the fire, with the quickness and agility of a panther, and plunged headlong into the great snow-drift below and disappeared from sight of the outwitted savages—the snow itself being so light and dry that it offered scarcely more resistance than a bed of thistle-down.

A dozen pistol-shots were fired into the snow, then, Red Hand, with a fierce yell, shot into the great drift in pursuit of the cunning trapper-boy.

The holes made in the snow closed behind Joe and the chief as soon as they were made, consequently they left no trail behind to guide others.

Two warriors climbed out of the ditch to watch for the appearance of the white fox on the bank, but the blinding storm drove them back.

Those left stood patiently, eagerly awaiting the return of their chief, while the disguised white man walked the inclosure, and swore furiously in his beard.

The Indians felt almost certain that Red Hand would recapture the young pale-face, and they expected every moment to see him bulge out of the snow-bank with the captive in hand. But they were doomed to great disappointment. An hour passed, and he came not.

"Red Hand," said one of the warriors, "will bring the pale-faced boy when he comes."

"Yes," growled the disguised renegade, sarcastically; "judgment-day will bring a good many boys, and braves too, when it comes. The fact of it is, Vagabond Joe has outwitted us all."

CHAPTER III.

A VOICE FROM THE "DEEP."

WHEN the friends of Vagabond Joe and Bildad Meeks returned to camp and found them gone, they had no difficulty in determining the cause of their absence.

"The cussed Injins have been here at last," said Neutral Bill, the hunter and guide to the little party of settlers, from the famed Neutral Grounds.

"Of course, they have carried them away prisoners," said Captain Ralph Howard.

Captain Howard was good authority, as well as Neutral Bill. He was a young man, yet had seen service in the United States army as captain of dragoons, fighting the treacherous foe of civilization upon the south-western frontier. It was there that he had conceived a desire for the sport of hunting; and since his retirement from the army he had embraced every opportunity to gratify this love of the chase and rifle.

"I'm afraid, captain," declared Neutral Bill, "that yer speakin' of the truth. I'm fond of the truth when it's convenient, but when a mistake I'll do just as well, I've no objection to it. It seems queer that Vagabond Joe'd be catched by the tarnal critters; but then I low the storm's been the cause of the hull of it."

"Yes, and it will continue to favor the savages. Every track is filled with snow. But we must not stand idle. It will soon be dark, and every moment employed before will be of great value to us and the captives. If you have any idea of the course taken by the foe, Bill, lead out."

"They'd go north-west, to be sure," said Bill, "ca'se their village's off in that direction. I don't think, however, they'll make for home tonight. They must have a temporary huntin' camp up the country somewhar, and we might blunder across it, who knows. Come on, boys; it's been many days since I war on the warpath, and I'm a leetle rusty; but I think all the fight that war ever in me's thar yit. This's quite a flint of a storm, but I've been in wusser."

Buttoning their coats to their chins and drawing their caps down well over their heads and ears, the little band of hunters set off in search of their friends. They traveled on through the storm as fast as possible. Night settled around them, dark and furious. The deep snow made walking heavy and laborious. It was not very cold, but disagreeable.

It seemed impossible for any human being to keep his course through that awful night and storm; but with head bent to the driving blast, Neutral Bill pressed on and on, his comrades following close behind. The eternal crunch, crunch, of the snow beneath their feet was the only sound that broke upon the monotony of their journey, aside from the storm that went roaring through the heavens.

On and on they trudged, the snow clinging to their clothing, and their chilled breath forming into heavy icicles about their mouths upon their beards.

As they continued northward, the wind seemed to grow stronger and trail the flurryng snow through the forest aisles with a savage force.

"We must be approaching the plain," Captain Howard ventured to remark under his frozen beard.

"Yes, boys, we are," replied Old Bill; "to tell you the God's truth of it, I am lost, and have been for two hours."

"Lost?" exclaimed his companions in astonishment.

"Lost," repeated the old hunter, coming to a halt upon a sparsely wooded hillside; "here we are on the edge of the woods, and the storm slappin' us square into the face."

"Heavens! we'll perish," said Mr. Braxton, one of the Fort Dodge settlers.

"We will if we venture out into the plain," admitted Old Bill; "but let us go on down into the holler, and see what's thar; and mebby then I can git my bearings."

The old hunter led the way down a steep hill-

side, the storm beating into their faces until they could scarcely breath. They had soon reached the valley, and were moving rapidly across it, when suddenly a cry escaped the lips of the guide, and the next instant he sunk from view of his companions, as though the earth had opened and swallowed him.

"My God! where's Bill?" exclaimed Captain Howard, stopping short, for he alone had seen the old hunter disappear.

"Where, indeed?" cried Joe Braxton.

The captain cautiously advanced a step or two, feeling the way before him with the muzzle of his rifle; but the first thing he knew he felt himself sinking downward into some unknown depths.

A general exclamation escaped the lips of the party.

"Ah, by heavens!" ejaculated Fred Manning, the boon companion of Captain Howard, "there is a pitfall—a chasm there!"

"Then our friends have been—But hark!"

The sound of laughter came up from the depths of the pit into which Neutral Bill and Captain Howard had disappeared so mysteriously.

The little party of storm-travelers listened.

"Hullo, up thar, boys!" they heard the voice of Old Bill call out from below; "the rest of ye tumble down here, and we'll go into camp. It's a little the snuggest spot this side of the Neutral Grounds. Jist drap yerselves over kind o' easy—only a fall of ten or a thousand feet; and you'll land in a soft pile of snow. Come down, and walk into our parlor."

The hunters, eager to escape the fury of the cutting blast, dropped themselves over the bank as directed; and then, guided by the voice of Old Bill, crept into a large commodious cavern, where the storm could not reach them. It was dark as pitch, however, and after groping about and finding a perfect network of dry roots and twigs, Old Bill proceeded to light a fire. This he was readily enabled to do, being provided with the necessary means of the hunter for procuring fire.

In a moment a bright fire diffused its warmth and ruddy glow through the cavern, one wall of which was formed by an overhanging bank, and the other by a pile of drifted snow. A novel sight was presented to the view of the snow-bound hunters, and for a moment they regarded it with a look of awesome admiration.

The wall of earth had been made by the wear of water, though none of this element was there now. Millions of roots, large and small, hung bare from the overshadowing bank. They were gnarled and twisted into a thousand ogreish forms, and tangled and knotted like the hair of the Furies—all of which seemed aquiver with life, as the light, reflected from the spotless bank of snow on the opposite side, danced and trembled over them.

The face and form of each man were covered with snow, and to those that wore beards, hung long, clanking icicles. Altogether, they resembled the fabled storm-spirits of the Boreal land—looking as weird and grotesque in the dim, uncertain glow of their light as spirits in the gloaming.

"Well, boys," said Captain Howard, as he thredded the ice and snow from his beard with his fingers, "this is a little more than I had bargained for—a very disagreeable ending of a pleasant week's hunting."

"Oh, this is nothin', captain, after you git used to it," protested Neutral Bill. "In fact, this is whar the real sport comes in."

"I would enjoy it better, probably, were Vagabond Joe and Mr. Meeks not in danger," replied Howard.

"Wall, captain, we might as well keep a bold front and stiff backbone, and laugh instead of cry. It'll do jist as much good as to wilt and worry. Everything seems to be ag'in' us at this time; but I never seed a storm in all my life that could beat me out. I got tangled up in a night once before, but had no such luck as to tumble into a place like this. No, sires; I just curled up and laid down and let the storm kiver me. And you may bet the old jade tucked her quilts close around me as though I was her precious dear; and thar full a hull week, more or less, I laid still as a bear in a holler log. Finally I dug out like a hedgehog and went on my way as happy as a woodpecker in a cherry tree."

"I should think you would have smothered," observed Fred Manning.

"All but that, my boy; thar's more natural warmth under a snow-drift than thar is in the polar regions of the brimstone country; and as to smotherin', why, you couldn't smother nothin'—whew! what war that?"

The old hunter started up in great excitement.

A sound not unlike a far-off human voice fell upon his ears.

All held their breath and listened.

Something like a moan came to their ears. It seemed to issue from the earth, or snow-bank, and was freighted with accents of horrible agony.

"It's somebody in distress," decided Captain Howard.

"I do wonder if it is?" queried Bill.

As if in answer to his question the sound again broke upon their ears—nearer and louder than before. The eyes of our party became fixed upon the snow-bank before them as if held there by some horrible fascination.

Closer and closer the sound seemed to come.

"My God! some one is buried under that snow!" exclaimed Fred Manning.

"Harkee! harkee!" ordered Old Bill, with uplifted hands.

The next instant they saw the snow, just opposite the fire, bulge outward; then a human head was thrust from the wall of crystal flakes.

The little party of hunters started back in amazement.

The head slowly emerged from the snow, and was followed by a pair of shoulders, a lithe form, and a pair of legs incased in buck-skin.

Standing upright, this figure shook the snow from his form.

"By gracious!" cried Captain Howard; "it is our guide, Vagabond Joe!"

"So it is, my gallant cavaliers," replied the intruder, who was Vagabond Joe, sure enough.

As the youth emerged from the snow, he dragged something into the light behind him; and that something, all saw, was an Indian warrior.

It was the young chief, Red Hand.

Vagabond Joe had turned the tables upon his captor.

CHAPTER IV.

A TORPEDO IN A SNOWBALL.

THE shout which greeted the unexpected arrival of Vagabond Joe was followed by an outburst of ringing laughter. The ludicrous appearance of the boy with his wet, draggled hair hanging about his face; his big eyes distended with surprise his mouth open, his clothing disarranged, and the Indian writhing at his heels, all were sufficient to have provoked the most sedate judge into merriment.

"By the great mollyhorns!" the young trapper exclaimed, "what in the name of the mysteries are you fellers doin' here? What's up, boys? what ails you? Have you all got the laughin' fan-tods? Is't a real fact that I have met my friends on earth? or have we all undergone a change and slipped off into—well, the land of the condemned?"

"Now, Joseph," said Old Bill, "you know your'e on yarth; but we tumbled into this ditch lookin' round for you; and here we concluded to remain till the storm subsided. But, whar did you come from? what's that you've got that?"

"Well, sir, I come from the upper eend of this gully whar eight or ten red-skins are tucked away snug as a bug in a rug. Me and President Bildad Meeks got nabbed by the red scavengers and waltzed off up to camp; and when they concluded to stand me up for a target for pistol-practice I filed objections, and jumped into a big snow-drift and poled out like a mole through the snow. And I hadn't gone fur till I felt somethin' clutchin' at my heels, and knowin' it was a red-rosy, I turned and let into him like a wild-cat. Great war of the Pequods! if we didn't make the snow and fur fly, I don't want a cent. We fit and fit for—conscience only knows how long; and it war nip and tuck atwixt us. But I finally got the red, rip-roarin' jibberainosay by the tail of the head and then I fetched him a-keelin' from taw. He soon give up, and then I began to back down the channel, snakin' the young chief after me; and if we've bored one rod we've bored a mile through this drift. I see now that my captive is a distinguished cock-alorum of Ishtahaba's band. It is the young chief, Red Hand."

The hunters expressed their surprise, and congratulated Joe on his successful escape.

"But where's Bildad Meeks?" asked one of the settlers.

"I left him reposin' in Red Hand's camp; but I expect he's got more holes in his presidential carkass than a cake of honeycomb."

"I'll tell you, boys, I can't remain quiet if Bildad's in trouble," Old Bill declared.

"You can't do anything in the face of this storm, even if you should attempt it," was Captain Howard's opinion.

"I'm goin' out to see," replied Bill, "for I just can't stand this, nor won't try."

So the old borderman crawled out of their comfortable quarters. His friends expected the storm would drive him back; but in this they were disappointed. An hour went by and they heard nothing of him; but finally he was heard to call out overhead:

"I say, boys, come out here. The storm's subsided; the moon and stars are shinin', and it's warmer than a July night—fact. Come out and see for yourselves."

Allowing considerable for the old hunter's exaggerations, the little party hastened from their quarters out into the open air.

They found the storm had cleared away, and that the moon and stars were shining. But it lacked considerable of being as warm as represented by Old Bill.

Our friends soon got their bearings, assisted by the position of the moon and by Vagabond Joe, and at once turned their attention toward the Indian encampment.

As they advanced up the valley, Old Bill suddenly discovered a dark form moving about against the white snow, and he had no sooner called the attention of his friends to the fact, than Vagabond Joe pronounced it a savage.

As the skulking red-skin was not over a hundred yards away, the young trapper borrowed Captain Howard's rifle, and tried a shot upon him. What the result was they were unable to fully ascertain; though it was certain the Indian at once disappeared, while a fierce, vindictive yell rose from that immediate vicinity.

A few moments later, bullets came whistling in close proximity to our friends' ears, while the ring of the enemy's rifles cracked out clear and distinct not over a hundred yards away.

"We've got to timber, boys, timber!" exclaimed Old Bill.

"Rack out, Bill," said Joe; and the whole party at once broke for the woods on the top of a steep hill overlooking Red Hand's camp.

As soon as they were under cover of the trees, our friends began to speculate upon some plan for the rescue of Bildad Meeks. Vagabond Joe remained quiet, and respectfully listened to the suggestions of his elders on the subject; but when all had spoken without arriving at any practicable plan, the youth ventured to assert:

"Friends, I've got an idea in my head that I b'lieve will do well. At least, it can be tried."

"The great difficulty," said Captain Howard, "is in devising some means by which we can reach the enemy's camp without being exposed to a raking fire. This renders all plans, already suggested, impracticable."

"But, captain," averred Joe, "my plan will do away with that difficulty."

"Joe's a right to be heard," proclaimed Fred Manning, "so let us hear what his suggestions are."

"I can't tell it as well as I can illustrate it," replied Joe, "and if you'll just give me a lift, some of you, I'll show you a hole with a ring around it."

Giving his captive, Red Hand, into the care of the two settlers, Vagabond Joe walked into the woods several rods and began piling up a ball of snow—which being damp and heavy, was capable of being closely compacted. When he had made a good-sized ball, he began rolling it along upon the ground, just as every schoolboy has done many a time. As the ball advanced it grew larger, and by the time Joe had reached his friends, it was all he could do to move it.

"Now, boys," the boy said, "just lend me a helpin' hand. I want to roll this snowball down among the Indians."

Joe had explained to his friends the situation of the enemy's camp, and the manner of its construction. They saw, at once, that it would be a very easy matter to roll the ball down into camp, for the hill was very steep and the surface even, but they could see no real benefit to be derived from it. Moreover, it would be just as liable to crush Meeks, if he were still alive, as any of the red-skins.

But Joe set aside all fears as to their friend being in danger. In fact, it was not his desire to roll the first ball into camp, but so close to it as to draw the red-skins' attention to his movements.

So three or four of the hunters put their shoulders to the huge snowball and it began to roll onward, gathering in size and weight as it advanced. By the time it had reached the edge of the woods, and the steepest part of the hill, it had grown to such a size that its own ponderous weight, and its natural tendency to obey the laws of gravitation, were sufficient to carry it forward without physical agency; and giving

it a final push, the hunters let the great mass go.

It started off slowly, but gathered speed and size as it continued to advance. It licked the snow clean from its track, and rushing on—overcoming all opposition—finally leaped into the channel just below the Indians' encampment.

Our friends saw it disappear in the valley, and heard the derisive yell of the savages come quavering up on the air.

"Mollyhorns!" exclaimed Joe, "a few sich yells as that'd bu'st their gullets."

"Well, what next, Joe?" said Captain Howard.

"More snowballs," replied the lad; "it's royal good fun, if it don't do any good."

Captain Howard and his companions seemed to partake of some of Joe's boyish spirit; and for fully an hour they amused themselves by rolling one ball after another down into the valley, and keeping the Indians in a constant state of excitement. Joe would permit none of them started so as to roll into the camp. All saw that he had an object in this, and it was finally made manifest when he said:

"Now, boys, I'm goin' down into that camp to git President Bildad out. I'm goin' to retaliate on him for turnin' me out of school, by doin' him a kind act. Sich revenge as that cuts deeper than mean acts. I may fail, but if I do, and lose my hair, why, it's only Vagabond Joe gone, and nobody'll miss him. So now, boys, heave up a huge old ball."

Wondering what the boy could possibly have in his mind, two of the hunters assisted him in rolling up a ball fully five feet long by four in diameter. When it had been moved to the edge of the woods, Joe took a hunting-knife, and out of the center of the ball he cut and dug a hole sufficient to admit the full length of his body.

This done, he appropriated Red Hand's blanket to his own use—enveloping his head and shoulders therein. Then he borrowed a pair of revolvers of the old "pepper-shell" pattern, and ensconcing himself in the big snowball, said:

"Now, boys, I'm ready. Aim her a little to the right of where the others fell, and then tetch her off easy. If she drops in the Injuns' camp, I'll bet they'll think a torpedo's bu'sted among 'em."

"But suppose the ball don't burst at all—they'll nab you before you can extricate yourself," said Joel Braxton.

"No danger of that," returned Joe; "for if you aim her right, and we roll onto their roof, and it gives way, I'll bet I git out of this."

"But you'll be so 'tarnal dizzy, boy, that you can't tell which side your face's on," expostulated Old Bill. "You'll roll over every time that snowball does; don't you see?"

"I'll take my chances on that, Billiam," replied Joe, determined not to give up to all the discouraging possibilities of failure. "I've been rolled down hill more'n once in a snowball and holler log, and come out right side foremost. Jist give me a shove and I'll take all risks. If I fail, and git caught by the smut-faces, you can trade that young chief, Red Hand, for me—me, remember, not President Bildad. Now, boys, all together—a-yeh!—here we go a-kitin'!"

He drew his head into the great snowball like a snail into its shell, and before any of the older heads could prevent the act, in case it was their desire to do so, Fred Manning and Jack Aborn gave the ball a push and set it in motion.

Away it crept—slowly at first—grinding and crunching over the ground—growing larger and larger at each turn. Faster and faster it bounded onward straight toward the Indian camp. It soon reached the valley, glided out upon the roof of the encampment and crushed the whole frail covering under its ponderous weight. The ball fell in the middle of the camp and burst into a thousand pieces. Vagabond Joe lay sprawling in the midst of the wreck, half buried under it.

The savages began scrambling out from under their fallen roof. They omitted their usual yell of derision this time, for the blankets that had formed the covering to their house immediately began to burn. Smoke and steam spread out upon all sides and threatened to smother all remaining within the burrow.

Vagabond Joe taking advantage of this unexpected covering of smoke and steam, rose to his feet, drew his knife and then groped his way to where Bildad Meeks was tied when he escaped. He was aided in his search, by the old man setting up a terrible yell for help; and reaching his side, the lad severed his bonds and then said:

"Now git your presidential carcass outen here in a hurry."

Bildad did not wait for a second invitation, but made good use of his freedom and legs.

In the confusion and blinding smoke, Joe and a savage collided with such force as knocked Joe down; but springing to his feet he began firing both of his revolvers at the same time at the figures that went sneezing and coughing through the smoke.

This was something the red-skins had not expected, and believing the whole party of white hunters were upon them, they dashed from their quarters and took refuge in the snow-drift that had served Joe such a good purpose a few hours before.

Thus, in a minute's time, after he entered the camp, Joe found himself master of the situation. He had accomplished far more than he had calculated upon; or rather, he had performed it in a way different from what he had intended.

Elated by his success, the young dare-devil climbed upon the bank, uttered a defiant yell, as if to let his enemies know that he alone had routed them, then turned and bounded away up the hill, reaching the woods and his friends at the same time with Bildad Meeks, who came up puffing and blowing like an overworked ox.

A prolonged shout greeted the return of the daring boy and the old settler; and for awhile Joe was the recipient of many congratulations.

"It worked well, boys—better'n I'd calculated upon," the youth finally found opportunity to reply. "The ball smashed the cover of the camp down into the fire, and sich a smoke and steam of old wool and Ingin grease I never seen. I cut the president's bonds, then opened these pepper-shells on the red-skins. I don't think I tetch'd one of them, but I cleared the pit in a jiffy, and then lit out."

"Joe, that was a novel and daring expedient, worthy of an older head and stronger arm than yours," Captain Howard declared.

"Older head!" exclaimed Old Bill; "bah! that boy'll buck ag'in' any old pate in these diggin's; and I'll go a guinea that he'll come out five lengths ahead. No, sir, captain; none o' them can get away with Vagabond Joseph."

"He's brave, that I'll say," Bildad Meeks ventured to confess, as though it pained the selfish, bigoted old ignoramus to admit the fact.

"Wonderful gratitude," remarked Captain Howard, aside, to Fred Manning, in a tone of righteous contempt and keen sarcasm.

"Well now, friends," suggested Joe Braxton, "we are all together again, suppose we improve the time and get out of this."

"What'll be done with this Indian?" asked one.

"Kill him! kill the tarnal devil, and then we'll have no more trouble with him," exclaims Bildad Meeks, as if exasperated at the very sight of the young chief. "Give me a pistol, a knife, or a gun, and I'll finish him."

"You'll do no such thing," spoke Vagabond Joe, with a coolness that surprised his friends.

"What! do you mean to interfere in behalf of that savage when he was goin' to kill you by inches?" cried Bildad.

"I do, most assuredly," replied Joe, in calm, measured accents. "I b'long to civilization, and you're not goin' to murder prisoners with impunity, even if you do expel boys from school. If I'm to have my say, that young chief goes free. A kind act is appreciated by a red-skin, and that's more than I can say of all whiteskins."

Bildad Meeks felt the sting of the lad's sarcasm deeply; and when he saw that the rest of the party endorsed the boy's views and encouraged his impertinence, he felt that they were wanting in respect for age.

"That sounds like humanity, boys, exclaimed Fred Manning, in answer to Joe. "I say, let the Indian go. What is the verdict of the crowd?"

"Let him go!" responded a number of voices. "Kill him!" persisted Meeks; but he stood alone in his decision.

"Red-skin," said Joe, advancing and untying the chief's bonds, "you and me's been on a high-lonesome to-night, and now I'm goin' to let you go. I believe you are brave, for an Ingin, and won't forget that Vagabond Joe saved your life."

"Red Hand will never forget a friend. The white boy is brave and kind," replied the young chief.

"Good-evening, red-skin," added Joe, as the chief turned and walked slowly and calmly away, never deigning to look back nor betray the slightest evidence of fear.

CHAPTER V.
WHOSE LIGHT WAS IT?
In a few minutes after the release of Red

Hand, the whites were on their way southward toward their own camp. They journeyed through the wood and snow with light footsteps and buoyant spirits. Vagabond Joe was unusually jovial and exuberant. He loved adventure as he loved his food. His whole life had been spent in the midst of danger, and he came and went as though he bore a charmed existence.

As the night advanced, light fleecy clouds drifted athwart the sky, and a ring encircled the moon.

"That," said Joe, calling attention to the ring, "is a bad sign. It indicates more storm within three days. But I prophesy more storm between this and morning. I never seen it clear up in the night but what it spoilt the followin' day."

"That's the signs we old hunters go by," added Neutral Bill, "and they seldom fail. I think myself that it'll be snowin' afore mornin'."

"I hope your signs will all fail this time," said Captain Howard. "We have already had enough of storm and red-skins to answer all practical purposes."

"I like 'em both, captain," replied Joe; "they make fun and frolic for a feller. Now, me and President Bildad's had more solid, super-finished adventure to-night than old Satan could shake his finger at."

"I think such adventure anything but enjoyable," retorted Meeks.

"That's all ownin' to one's love of the beautiful, I'll admit, president," responded Joe, "and the strength of his vertebrae."

Meeks disdained to reply to the boy's humor.

Pushing on, the little party arrived in the vicinity of their camp between midnight and morning; and when they had gained a point whence they could command a view of their tents, they were not a little surprised to see a dim light shining from each one of them.

"By mollyhorns!" exclaimed Joe, whose keen eyes were the first to discover the fact; there's somebody in them tents. Ten to one a pack of smut-skins are riotin' in there on our game and supplies."

"Shouldn't wonder a bit," affirmed old Bill.

"If it's Ingins, friends," continued Joe, whose tongue, boy-like, ran incessantly, "we want to give 'em goss. This thing of foolishin' with the dasted critters is gettin' ancient. Don't you say so, Neutral Billiam?"

"In course I do; and hev all along."

"Gentlemen," protested Bildad Meeks, in his usual weighty tone, "use discretion. Don't run into danger when it can be avoided."

"If I'd adopted that plan, president, you'd still be in the hands of the red-skins," suggested Joe.

"But your risks, then, were a necessity," deprecated Meeks.

"Not by any means," rejoined the lad. "If you'd never escaped, notoin' but the eddytional interests of Fort Dodge would have suffered. But I'm willin' to do as the majority say: run or fight."

"I'm willing to do as Joe thinks best," decided Fred Manning, and his words were repeated by a majority of the party.

"Men," persisted Meeks, "the calm judgment of age should have precedence over the rash impetuosity of youth in matters of sich grave moment."

"We've tried Joe," Captain Howard answered, "and find that he is not wanting in judgment upon such matters."

"Nor impertinence," muttered Bildad, ungratefully.

"I believe I'll slip down to camp and reconnoiter. I don't see any of the introders movin' about," said Vagabond, preparing to depart.

"Be very careful, Joe," cautioned Captain Howard, "and report as soon as possible. I'm getting hungry and tired, and will fight for our camp if the odds are not too great."

Joe at once departed upon his mission. As he approached the tent he crossed the track of a sleigh and team that had been made there since the storm. They had come and gone in the same direction; and the youth was convinced by this evidence that white men occupied the tent. He observed no less precaution, however, and crept on until he had gained a position in the rear of the largest tent of the group. Pressing his ear against the canvas, he listened. He heard voices speaking the English tongue; but all were strange to him. He endeavored to catch the drift of their conversation, but could make out nothing definite.

Finally he drew his knife, and ran the desperate risk of cutting a small hole in the canvas. Fortunately, however, he escaped detection, and next applied his eye to the hole—a mere slit scarcely two inches long.

He was greatly surprised by the scene that met his gaze. The tent was lit up with the lantern belonging to Joe's friends, and was suspended from the apex of the structure. Great improvements had been made in the internal arrangements. The ground had been carpeted with soft furs; while to the pole-supports hung garments of fine and costly textures. Among them were a lady's shawl, cloak, and hat; and near by lay a set of sable furs.

Four men occupied the tent, and reclining upon a jaguar-skin, with her head resting upon the breast and arm of one of them, was a young woman of exceeding beauty. She appeared to be asleep, and the man who supported her gazed down into her face with a look that did not at all please Vagabond Joe.

The lady, for such she evidently was, could not have been over nineteen years of age. Her handsome face looked pale under the dim light of the lantern, and her eyes, although closed, bore evidence of recent weeping. A wealth of luxurious brown hair was gathered back from a brow of alabaster whiteness, and fell in rippling folds over the arm of her companion. Her head, thrown slightly back, revealed the pearly smoothness of a throat that rivaled in whiteness the collar of swan's down that encircled it. A white, dimpled hand lay upon her breast, and upon the index finger flashed a hoop of gold.

Vagabond Joe was strangely impressed by the presence of this girl; for he had never seen one so fair, so delicate, and, withal, of such patrician blood. He was well satisfied that she did not belong in the West; but must have come from the far East. He knew she was a lady by her fine, costly garments, her white face and dimpled hands. Intuition materially aided him in arriving at this conclusion, for, unsophisticated as Joe was, he had learned that external appearances did not always constitute a lady or gentleman.

But what was the woman doing there? What were those men to her? These were the questions that naturally arose in the youth's mind.

To him the woman seemed entirely out of her sphere. The men in no way seemed fit companions for her. They were rough, bearded fellows, strong and hardy as bordermen. Their language was not altogether rude, but it was far from being refined.

The one supporting the girl was about thirty years of age, and of the four, was by far the most intelligent and prepossessing. Yet his face wore a restless, wary look, such as Joe had seen upon faces before when a guilty conscience and mortal dread harassed the soul.

"There's something not right in there," the young vagabond remarked to himself; "angels and rascals don't associate, for if I'm any judge, that gal's an angel, and a purty one, too, if ever an angel descended to earth. And them men—well, I don't like their looks, for some reason or other; and I'll—"

His train of thoughts were here interrupted by seeing one of the strangers rummaging the camp-chest of Captain Howard, for this was the captain's tent. He saw the man take a silver cup from the box and hold it up on the tips of his fingers; at the same time he heard the man make some slight allusion to the wealth of the owner.

Joe recognized the cup as the private property of Captain Howard, and presently he heard the man read these words, which had been engraved upon it: "To Ralph Howard, from Irene."

"What's that?" exclaimed the man supporting the girl, as if startled by the hiss of a deadly serpent, while his face grew pale with abject horror.

"To Ralph Howard, from Irene," the man again read.

The woman stirred, opened her eyes—great, wondrous brown eyes that stared wildly and sadly about—and then in a troubled, flighty tone called out:

"Where is he? where is he?"

"Here, darling, here; don't worry," the man replied, and when she had again relapsed into her seeming stupor, he reached out, and taking the cup, hurled it out into the snow. The look that he gave his companions seemed to explain to them the cause of this conduct.

Joe, however, was not a little surprised by it; yet he became fully satisfied as to the character of the four men, and leaving the tent he continued the reconnoissance of the camp until he had seen inside of every tent. He found that all but the one were occupied by Indians, who were quietly smoking their pipes. They belonged to Ishatababa's band, and seemed disposed to regard the situation as perfectly safe.

Fully satisfied with his reconnoissance, Joe returned to his friends.

"Well, what did ye diskiver, Vagabond?" asked Neutral Bill.

"Lots and gobs; I'm completely confounded, upset, shook into confusion—annihilated, boys," replied the lad.

"Why? what's the matter, Joe?"

"Well, sir, all the tents but one, are filled with primroses of Ishatababa's band; that one has got four men and a woman in it; and if ever the shader of an angel fell upon earth, that gal's is the shader. I tell you she's perfectly delicious; and such finery! you'd ought to see it. Her face is as white as this snow, and her hand's as little and dimpled as a baby's. She's from the city, I know; for no western gal's got such flub-dubberries and fine things as she's got. But it seems to me she's as much out of place in that tent as I'd be on the top of the north pole. I wish you could get a peep at her, captain; I know you'd want to expire the next minute. And—oh, yes! I'd mighty forgot: I seen one of the men take your mug from your camp-chest, and when he read what was written upon it, the gal cried out 'Where is he?' and the man pacified her then, but his face wore the scorchin'est look you ever seen in all your life. He took the mug, finally, and slung it out at the door with all his vengeance. Spose you creep down there and look in, captain. They're all quiet as bears up for the winter, and don't 'pear to be expectin' the owners of the camp in."

Captain Howard felt strangely impressed by Joe's story—particularly that part relating to the silver cup; and so he concluded to creep down to the camp and get a peep at the occupants of that one tent.

Observing Joe's instructions carefully, the captain had no difficulty in reaching the rear of the tent, nor in finding the little slit made by Vagabond's knife.

Applying his eye to the aperture, he quickly glanced over the interior. He saw all that Joe had described, but the face of the woman. He could see her form plainly enough reclining upon a couch of skins, but her face was concealed by the head of the man who was bending over her in an affectionate manner. Presently, however, the man raised his head, and then Ralph Howard saw the maiden's face upturned and her eyes gazing up into those of him who supported her.

One glance at the face of the man and the girl, and then Howard's heart seemed to grow deathly sick and his brain to reel. He started up, staggered back, and turning, fled the spot.

He made his way back to his friends, and taking Fred Manning aside, said:

"Fred, I want you to do me a favor." He spoke in a strange, husky tone.

"Captain," said Fred, startled by his friend's excitement, "you are excited: what is the cause of it? what favor do you want of me?"

"I want you to shoot me dead! I ask it as a favor."

"Why, Ralph Howard, you are crazy. What ails you, man?"

"Oh, God, Fred! I dread to tell you the truth; but she whom I supposed was a thousand miles from here to-night—she whose last words to me were words of love and vows of eternal devotion—Grace Manville, my affianced wife, is in yonder tent, pillowin' her head upon the breast of a villain—smiling in the face of Dr. Burton Cudmore!"

CHAPTER VI.

OUT OF THE TOILS AND INTO THE STORM.

FRED MANNING was completely astounded by his friend Howard's revelation and conduct. He could not credit the story, it seemed so unreasonable and vague—yea, impossible. For, in a quiet home, far away in the sunny South, he and Howard had left Grace Manville two months previous, smiling and happy. She bore a name irreproachable. She was a handsome, accomplished young lady, at the shrine of whose beauty of face and heart more than one man of distinction had worshiped. Doctor Burton Cudmore, he knew, had been an unsuccessful rival with Captain Howard. It was generally known that the gallant young captain and Grace were engaged; and so, it seemed impossible that she should disregard her vows, and desert her home and friends with such a man as Cudmore.

"Captain," Fred protested, "I believe you are deceived—laboring under a mistake. It cannot be Grace Manville in that tent."

"I have not been deceived, Fred. It is Grace; I could not be mistaken in her face, and that of Burton Cudmore, too."

"Then, by heavens! there's something wrong."

"I know there is, Fred."

"But I do not mean that Grace has been a willing party to the wrong."

"Do you think so, Fred?"

"I would be safe in saying, I know it, captain."

At this juncture Vagabond Joe came running up to where the two stood, and in an excited manner said:

"Boys, fall back! there's a pack of Ingins comin' down from the west, and I believe they're a band of Omahas; and if they are, there'll be some fightin', now mind. The Omahas and Ishtahaba's followers are pisen to each other—deadly enemies. May God protect the poor young angel in the tent, if they do get to fightin'. Her captors may kill her to keep her out of the hands of the Omahas, for I believe she is a captive!"

The three hurried back into the woods, and joined the rest of their friends.

The Omahas came on out of the woods, and like skulking wolves, approached the tents.

A few moments later the sound of excited voices rose on the air in front of the lodges, telling that a conflict, true enough, between the foes was inevitable.

Vagabond Joe, turning to Fred Manning, said:

"Loan me a revolver, and I'll slip around there and see what I can do for the girl while they're fightin'."

Fred gave the youth both of his revolvers; then by a circuitous route Joe finally made his way back to the rear of the tent in which the woman was confined.

Peering into the lodge, he saw that she was alone. The men had gone out, and were endeavoring to quell the storm that was brewing between the red-skins. The maiden was frightened, and sat gazing wildly around her like one bewildered.

High and fierce were the words now passing between the whites and Sioux on one side, and the Omahas on the other. A question of right to the pale-face hunters' deserted camp, also the hunting-grounds of the Lizard rivers, seemed the points at issue between them.

Joe perceived that the Sioux were determined to force a battle, and that the terrible crisis was at hand. He waited patiently for it to begin, for he had his course of action marked out in case it did.

He was somewhat disappointed, however, when he suddenly heard the report of rifles out in the vicinity of his friends. It told him that they had been attacked—no doubt by a party of Sioux that were coming to join their friends. This endangered the youth's situation; still he did not flinch from his original designs.

The conflict in the woods produced a momentary suspension of hostile words in camp; but suddenly the war-whoop of Ishtahaba resounded through the night. It was followed by the "ping" of a revolver in front of the tent and a cry of savage vengeance.

Then the conflict became general. The war-cry of the Omahas and Sioux rent the night.

The maiden started to her feet as a bullet tore through the tent close to her head.

A savage with a cloven skull suddenly fell with his body half in the lodge. A sight of the ghastly object forced a smothered cry of horror from the poor girl's lips.

Vagabond Joe drew his knife and sli the tent from top to bottom. Then he glided into the Lodge.

The maiden uttered a cry of alarm at sight of him; but the sound of the conflict outside drowned her voice.

One word and one look from Joe seemed to quiet her fears, and assure her of his kindly intentions.

"Miss Stranger," the brave boy said, "are you here of your own free will and accord?"

"I am not," she answered, in a voice full of terror.

"Do you want to escape?" he questioned.

"Yes; I want to die!" she responded.

"Oh, murderation! you're skeered; don't be afeared. I'm Vagabond Joe; if you'll foller me, mebby we can escape while they're fightin'. But there's not a holy second to lose, Miss Stranger."

As he spoke, Joe took down the maiden's cloak and shawl and adjusted them about her shoulders. Without a second thought the girl consented to trust herself to the protection of the boy-stranger.

Joe now picked up a rifle that lay at his feet, and placed it and its accoutrements upon a hand-sledge in the tent that had been used as a seat by Captain Howard and his friend. Upon this sledge he also quickly piled several blank-

ets, a robe of wolf-skin, one of jaguar-skin, and one of buffalo. Then he stepped out of the tent and drew the sledge and its load after him.

The fair captive, with wildly throbbing heart, stepped into the night that was now ringing with the horrible din of battle. Joe took her by the hand and moved rapidly away, pulling the sled along.

They plunged into the shadows of the deepest timber and labored on as fast as possible through snow nearly a foot deep.

It was a dreadful undertaking for the frail, tender girl who was already worn with the fatigue of the journey there into the valley of the Lizard. But a hope of escape from the power of her enemies buoyed up her lagging spirit and renewed her failing strength. Warmly clad, there was no danger of suffering by exposure.

Vagabond Joe made his way toward the river, and when it was at length reached, he led his protegee down the bank upon the ice.

"It will be easier travelin' here," he said; and so they found it. While the wind sucking down the river had kept the ice in the center clear of snow, a light crust had been permitted to gather along either side; and this made footing light and easy.

"We can hurry along a little here," Joe said,

"and if you git tired, Miss Stranger, you can

take a seat on the sledge and then I'll git out

onto the slick ice and jist take you a flukin'."

The maiden smiled sadly at the youth's kind

words—spoken uncouthly, yet with such a depth

of earnestness.

She was greatly surprised that such a mere boy should assume such responsibilities, as her young protector and rescuer had taken upon himself; and that, too, with all the self-assurance of an old, woodman. She regarded his slender form with wonder, for it seemed impossible that one so small could be possessed of such physical endurance.

After journeying a mile or two they stopped to listen. Joe prevailed on the maiden to sit down upon the sledge and rest.

All sound of the conflict had hushed; and as five minutes' listening brought no evidence of the condition of affairs behind them, Joe ventured to remark:

"The conflict has ended, Miss Stranger."

"Do you think they will find us?" the maiden inquired.

"It depends altogether on who's victors," the boy answered; "if your captors won the battle, they'll be apt to find and follow our trail. But if the others win, they may not know you were in the tent. My own friends, I'm awfully afraid, got into danger before we left the tent."

"Then you had friends near?" the maiden asked.

"Yes, I had several of them. I left them out in the woods when I crept down to help you; and I would have taken you to where they were, had I not heard fightin' goin' on out where I left them. But by mollyhorns! the lad suddenly exclaimed, as he scanned the heavens; "if our trail's not found within the next hour, it will not be found to-night; for I tell you, Miss Stranger, we're goin' to have another rattlin' ole snow-storm. I thought it had only cleared off to git a good ready for a regler blizzard, and told the boys so."

"Oh, I hope it will not snow!" the girl exclaimed.

"It was the fury of the storm at the beginning of night that drove my captors into the deserted camp where you found me, though I am sure I do not regret the fact now, but another storm may cause us great suffering."

"Not a bit of it, Miss Stranger; I'm too old a coon to be catched asleep in a snow-storm. I was just wishin' it would storm and conceal our trail. Don't you see the nub to it?"

"It would be in our favor in that respect," she admitted.

"Course it would! But, Miss Stranger, I've been dyin' to ask you a question or two: wasn't you landed in the camp up there in a sled?"

"Yes, sir," she answered; "I was taken from the stage, due at Fort Dodge at eight o'clock, some distance below the settlement, and placed in a sled and carried off. I had a gentleman friend on the stage that was also made way with; but what became of him, I know not. The road-agents must have killed him."

"Do you think your captors are road-agents?"

"I called them road-agents, though I believe they are a band of conspirators; and that my friend and I are the victims of their foul conspiracy. I overheard enough from their lips, when they supposed I was unconscious, to warrant this belief."

"Then you don't live in this outlandish country?"

"No; my home is many long miles from here. I was on my way to the settlement to visit a friend. My name is Grace Manville."

"Grace Manville," repeated the young guide.

"Well, it differs a little from mine in elegance."

"What did you tell me your name was?" she asked.

"Vagabond Joe."

A smile lit up the face of the fair girl, and she was about to reply when a strange, dismal cry broke upon her ears, causing her to start to her feet and cling closer to the side of her young protector.

"What was it, Joe?" she asked.

"That was nothin' but the cry of a wolf," he answered, with a good-natured, boyish laugh that did much toward removing her sudden fright.

"Indeed! it is the first I ever heard," she answered. "How very dismal and heartrending!"

"I've heard sweeter music, myself, Miss Graceful," Joe replied; "but I guess we'll have to be peggin' on."

They resumed their flight. The sky became overcast with light, leaden-gray clouds. The atmosphere grew damp and heavy; and soon the snow began to fall again—this time in large, damp flakes that clung to whatever they touched.

And here I will say that this was the beginning of that terrible storm which made the winter of the year 1856 the most severe and prolonged in the memory of the oldest hunter or settler in the North-west. It snowed for nearly a week with but a few hours' intermission, and then the wind kept the air filled with blinding, drifting snow. During the week of snow-storm the weather was comparatively warm, the mercury seldom falling below freezing point; but when the storm ended the bitter cold set in.

Joe and his fair companion trudged on. The snow, falling in perfect sheets, weighed them down and made travel heavy and laborious. Grace tried to induce Joe to abandon his sledge, but in vain. He dragged it along with a patient determination, for he knew not what moment it, or the articles upon it, might be needed. He talked away incessantly, boy-like. He addressed words of cheer and encouragement to Grace, and then rambled off on some story of his adventures.

Finally Grace asked:

"Joe, how far is it to your settlement?"

"Sorry to tell you, Miss Graceful, that it's over twenty miles as the river runs."

A cry of hopelessness and surprise burst from the fair fugitive's lips.

"Oh, I can never make that distance, Joe. I shall die with cold and fatigue!"

"Won't you let me arrange a seat for you on this sledge, Miss Graceful? I can—"

"No, no," she interrupted, "save yourself, Joe. You are a brave, noble boy; but you cannot stand it to drag me through this storm. Go on, Joe, and leave me to my fate—save yourself."

"Never!" replied Joe, emphatically. "I'll be frozen stiffer'n a jumpin'-jack, before it shall be said that Vagabond Joe deserted an angel that couldn't fly for want of wings. If you won't let me draw you on this sled, I'll stick right by you, Miss Graceful, till the last breath. That's me, Vagabond Joe, to a scratch."

With this determination, the youth conducted the girl slowly onward until she finally sunk to her knees with exhaustion and discouragement.

"Oh, God, save me!" she cried, imploringly, addressing herself to Heaven.

"He'll not desert you, Miss Graceful," Joe replied, kindly assisting her to her feet, and then conducting her to the bank and out into the woods.

"You sha'n't die, Graceful, as long's my head's hot," he continued; "I'll save you in spite of the road-agents, the Injins and the storm. Now I want you to sit down here and let me cover you all up, then I'll see what can be done to 'rds a camp."

He spread a blanket for her feet to rest upon, and then she sat down on the sledge. Taking another blanket he threw it over her head and shoulders, and carefully tucked it about her form so that the snow might not reach her.

"You see, Miss Graceful," he said, "it was mighty lucky I brought these things along. They'll be an awful comfort to us. How's that? Can you breathe?"

Upon being assured that she was comfortably bundled up from the storm, Joe applied himself to work, determined to avail himself of the snow-bound hunter's last resort for a camp, by recourse to a snow-house.

Hard by the youth found a large Linden tree. It was hollow as a shell, and having partially

rotted away upon one side near the bottom, it had fallen, and lodging in another tree, now lay at an angle of about forty-five degrees. Seeing the great hole in the side near the root of the fallen monarch, Joe exclaimed:

"That'll make a spankin' chimney for a fireplace, so here goes."

He rolled up ball after ball of the damp snow large as he could lift. These he arranged in lines in the shape of a hollow square so that the open end of the hollow tree would come on the inside. He made other balls, compact as possible, and piled them up on this foundation. He laid up tier after tier of the crystal blocks until he had raised a wall four feet high. He then cut some long slender sticks and laid them across the top, and upon these he spread two blankets—completely roofing over his little snow structure. He hung another blanket over the doorway or entrance, and his house was completed; but not quite ready for occupation. Creeping inside he carefully rolled and scraped all the snow from the floor and threw it outside. This was accomplished very satisfactorily, for a thick layer of leaves underneath enabled him to peel the ice and crust from the ground without difficulty.

To keep up the spirits of the pretty fugitive, Joe whistled softly and merrily as he worked away. She knew not what he was doing, for her face was covered; but it seemed as though she had been seated there for hours when she was at length aroused from her mental agony by the voice of the youth saying:

"Now, then, Miss Graceful, if you'll rise I'll escort you into the Crystal Palace."

He lifted the blanket from about her head and form and shook off the snow. Then he took Grace by the hand and leading her to the snow-hut, drew aside the blanket that covered the entrance.

A cry of surprise and delight burst from the girl's lips.

The ruddy glow of a fire on the inside flashed brightly out into the night and storm.

Grace Manville entered the novel little structure, her sad heart gathering courage from the sight and influence of the cheerful glow of the fire. The light reflected by the white walls lit up the apartment with a dazzling splendor. She glanced around her with surprise written upon her fair face, and a smile hovering around her lips. She saw that walls of sparkling snow were upon all sides; and blankets stretched across the top and supported by sticks, answered the purpose of a roof. The open end of a reclining tree, she perceived, answered the purpose of a chimney, and the ground the purpose of a hearth. A cheery little fire was already burning thereon—the smoke dancing off up the tree.

"Is this what you have been doing for me, Joe?" the maiden asked in surprise.

"I'm pleased to say it is, Miss Graceful," he responded, with a smile and a look of manly pride.

"Oh, you are certainly a little hero, Joe! I begin to think that a snow-storm is your element. Why, this is a Crystal Palace, sure enough! I am surprised, delighted."

"That's it, exactly—that's what I wanted to do, for I was bound and determined you shouldn't suffer, Miss Graceful," Joe replied, carpeting the floor with a blanket.

The next thing he did was to bring in the hand-sled, and spreading the robes and jaguar-skin upon it, invited his guest to be seated.

"Thank you," she said, accepting the seat. "I do hope, Joe, you will put yourself to no further trouble for me to-night. You must be fatigued."

"Great mollyhorns! this is fun for me, Miss Graceful."

"Then you must be a storm-spirit, Joe," she declared; "but I would think the heat of your fire would melt down your walls."

"Oh, no; not a bit of it, Graceful. Me and an old hunter lived six weeks once in a snow-house snug as b'ars in a holler snag. After the storm covers the palace over, and stops up all the cracks and crannies, it'll be warm in here without a fire, if you keep well bundled up. But then we'll keep a little along for light; and to drive the blues out of one's feelings. A cheerful light's a wonderful thing, Miss Graceful. Many and many's the night I've set alone for hours watchin' the fire. I could see most anything in the flames; and I always felt better after holding a mental concert with the people, dogs and deer that my fancy figured out in the flames."

"You're an idealist, Joe," and Grace gave a smile of admiration. "You are a poet as well as a hunter and trapper."

Joe accepted the compliment with thanks, although he was in some doubt as to what an idealist was. Presently, he rose to his feet and said:

"I b'lieve I'll run out and gather up some more fuel to do through the night; then we will make arrangements for the morrow, providin' it isn't stormin'. It can't be sich an awful while till day now."

He lifted the blanket over the door and passed out, carefully closing the way after him. Grace Manville now found herself alone, and a feeling of gratitude for her deliverance from Cudmore's power filling her breast, she fell upon her knees, and clasping her hands together, lifted her voice to Heaven in prayer. Deep and fervent were the thanks she offered up for her escape from the hands of her enemies. She implored God's protection of the brave little Joe and herself, and asked for strength and courage to carry them beyond the dangers that beset them upon all sides.

As if in mockery of her prayers, a prolonged and unearthly scream that chilled the blood in her veins and sent an icy shudder to her heart, smote suddenly upon her ears—holding her there transfixed upon bended knee like a statue of humble penitence—unable to move, unable to speak.

CHAPTER VII.

WHAT WAS IT?

GRACE MANVILLE'S eyes became fixed upon the fire as though held there by some horrible fascination; for, from the earth under the flame that awful scream had seemed to issue. A minute, that seemed an hour of desperate agony, passed when that choking, quivering wail burst forth again and again. The maiden saw the fire begin to dance, sputter and flash as if fed by sifted gunpowder. She heard a rushing, scrambling noise in the interval between the awful screams; and this told her from whence the dreadful sound was coming. It was from out the hollow tree up which the smoke and steam from the fire were ascending; and it was the dry, powdered dust of rotten wood on the inside, that was falling in the fire and feeding its flames.

Before the terrified girl had time for a second thought, there came a sudden rush and scramble, and the next moment the lithe, agile form of an American panther shot out of the tree—scattering the fire as he rushed over it—and dropped into a crouching position before her.

A tingling sensation of horror shot through every nerve and vein in the girl's body. She was conscious of her danger, having fully realized the situation at once; but, like one in a trance, she was unable to move or unable to speak. The body refused to obey the volition of the will-power. She was held enthralled by the sense of a sudden horror.

Blinded by the smoke and half suffocated, the panther crouched in the snow-hut, breathing hard and quick, and at the same time turning his head from side to side as if trying to accustom his eyes to the dazzling light that was reflected from the white walls of the hut.

Grace fixed her eyes upon the animal's quivering form with a horrified stare, and at length their eyes met—the maiden's and the panther's. The huge beast seemed to shrink as if under a magnetic shock when his green, scintillating orbs met those whose light was radiated from a human soul. He lay stretched at full length along the earth, his white claws clasped in the ground, his head between his extended paws, his spotted nose quivering, and his small ears lying close to his head.

For nearly a minute the two eyed each other; but, gradually, the panther's brute courage and instinctive ferocity rose, and it prepared for a leap. Its tail began to lash the ground, and every sinew in its agile form seemed strung to its highest tension.

A movement now, however slight, would be fatal to Grace Manville; and although ignorant of the fact, she never moved a muscle nor removed her eyes from those of the beast. A thousand wild, burning thoughts, weird and unnatural, flitted rapidly through the poor girl's mind. Her very soul seemed to be undergoing a horrible transformation. Strange sounds, like the rush of water, filled her ears, while her body seemed to be sinking into a dark, unfathomable abyss that grew more illimitable and dark as she descended; and then, as the last ray of light appeared to fade above, a heavy concussion jarred the air and she knew no more.

The panther lay a quivering mass upon the floor of the snow-hut, and near by lay the unconscious form of Grace Manville.

And Vagabond Joe, with a revolver in his

hand, entered the snow-lodge and bent over the inanimate girl. The muzzle of the weapon he held was still smoking, for it was he who had aimed the bullet that slew the panther.

Carefully lifting Grace from the ground, Joe placed her upon the couch of furs; then he dragged the carcass of the panther outside, brought in an arm-load of dry limbs and twigs, and depositing them at one side, sat down and watched over his insensible protege.

It was the first time Joe had ever seen a person swoon under any circumstances whatever; and being totally ignorant of any remedy to apply, even were it to be had, he could only wait and watch for nature to apply her own restorative and release the overwrought mind from its fetters of unconsciousness.

It seemed weary hours that he watched by her side; and it was with a feeling of great joy that he, at length, saw her open her eyes, gaze wildly around, and mutter incoherently.

The youth endeavored to assist her in regaining her thoughts; but not until she had fully recovered could he convince her that she was safe in his snow-hut.

"But the panther! where is the panther?" she exclaimed, gazing wildly around her.

"Deader'n a door-nail, Miss Graceful. I put a bee in the critter's ear, and it keeled over, sprawling and quivering. No, Miss Graceful, you're not dead by a long pop."

"I thank God!" she exclaimed, "though I presume it would be just as well, were I dead."

"Oh, gallinippers, Graceful! don't talk that way," Joe replied, in a gentle, reproving tone.

"It is mornin'—broad daylight; and jist as soon as I can git us a slice of breakfast, I'm goin' to pile out for home after my team to take you to the settlement. I've got the snuggest pair of elks, Miss Graceful, you ever seen. Why, I can work them like horses, and I'll hitch up and skip off up here in my Yankee-jumper, and then I'll take you a kitin' down the Lizard. I know you'll enjoy it."

Grace was delighted with the boy's earnest, enthusiastic devotion in her behalf. She could not find language to express her thanks for what he had already done for her, to say nothing of what he still proposed to do.

"I sincerely hope, Joe, that I may be able to repay you for your kindness," she said.

"Oh, botheration take the pay, Graceful, less it's in good wishes and sich things, and not in money. Why, I've got over two hundred dollars now that I don't know what to do with, less I give it to the poor, or endow a college, as I've heard them tell about. But, Graceful, that old painter got routed outen his nest nicely, didn't he? He couldn't stand it, could he?—too much smoke for his paintership. Great mollyhorns! didn't it let off a rip-roarin' scream, though! I tell you, I took the hint purty quick, and back I piked just in time to slap a bullet into the ugly critter's head. If you'd a' moved, Miss Graceful, I 'spect you'd never knowed what hurt you. Painters are awful savage critters; and when they go at a feller, I tell you they make the ribbons fly."

Grace shuddered as she thought of her narrow escape, and anxious to change the subject, she asked:

"Joe, has it quit storming?"

"No, ma'am; it's still beltin' it down like sixty, Miss Graceful. The snow's two feet deep now, and the good Lord only knows when it'll let up. I tell you, I'm afeard there's going to be another deluge—only this one'll be of snow instead of water. But let it come; we've got our ark ready, hain't we? We'll jist stick to Crystal Palace, Graceful, and I'll bet we'll come out in the spring like daisies."

Grace's face lit up with a smile, for she had begun to partake of some of the youth's hopeful spirit. Heretofore she had doubted his ability to accomplish what he had planned; but she had found that, although he gave free rein to his tongue, and range to his fancies, he left no point unguarded; and performed with dispatch, things that would have honored older heads and abler hands.

The lad took the rifle he had brought from camp the night previous, and went out in search of game for breakfast. As deer are unusually tame during the progress of heavy snow-storms, he had the fortune to kill a fine doe when but a short distance from camp. Securing a quarter of it, he hastily returned to camp.

"I never seen deer so tame, Miss Graceful," he remarked, as he entered the "Palace." "I didn't go a hundred yards till I brought this feller down, though I'd rather shot it a mile away than so close to camp, for fear them dasted Ingins might hear my gun and come masqueradin' down this way. But now, Miss Graceful, we'll

have a regular hunter's breakfast, done up brown. I suspect you're not used to such; but then it's the best we can do. It'll drive away hunger, and give us backbone and brace up our courage."

Having washed his hands and face in snow, the young hunter took his knife and cut off some thin slices of the choicest part of the quarter. These slices he laid upon some clean, red coals to broil, and soon the Palace was pervaded with the tempting odor of the cooking venison.

Grace watched the whole process, simple as it was, filled with curiosity and delight. Joe having assured her that they were in no immediate danger, she began to feel the pangs of hunger, and with her young protector, enjoyed the novelty of their situation, if it might be said that it could be enjoyed at all.

When the meat was done to a crisp brown, Joe removed it from the coals on the ends of sharpened sticks, and passed a share of it to Grace.

The maiden ate with a keen relish, not only to show her appreciation of her young protector's kindness, but because she was hungry, and the tender, juicy venison tasted delicious and nourishing.

After breakfast was over, Joe cut the rest of the meat into thin slices and sandwiched them away between layers of snow in a niche in the wall.

"If you get hungry, Miss Graceful," he said as he did so, "you can help yourself. I may be gone a day and night, and so I'll bring you in some more fuel, also. If I was only sure that I could find Captain Howard's party—"

"Captain Howard, did you say, Joe?" interrupted the girl, excitedly.

"Yes, ma'am, Captain Howard."

"Captain Ralph Howard?"

"Yes, ma'am, the same."

"My God, Joe, can this be possible?" she exclaimed, manifesting great excitement.

"It's so, Graceful, by the royal horn-spoons."

"Joe, I know Captain Ralph Howard," she continued. "He is a very dear friend of mine. Oh, Joe! can you not find him?" and her brown eyes beamed anxiously, hopefully into the lad's.

"I might try, Graceful; I left him last night near the camp when I went to help you. I would 'a' taken you right to him if they hadn't been fightin' off in that direction. But, for all I know, the boys were all killed, for I know they had a hot time of it 'bout the time we left the camp.

A look of pain and distress blanched the cheeks of Miss Manville; and after a moment's reflection, she asked:

"Joe, did Captain Howard know that I was in this country?"

"Yes; he crept down to the tent, come to think, looked in and seen you. I don't know why I didn't think of this before; but I'd been down ahead of him, and seen you and the men, and then I prevailed on him to go down. When he came back, I heard him ask Fred Manning to shoot him, but I don't know what for."

"Oh, great heavens! this is a worse blow than all, Joe," she cried, wringing her hands in agony. "I knew Ralph Howard had come West for a season of hunting, but I never dreamed of his being so far West. Oh! what a terrible fatality is this! and where is it to end? Joe, do you think you could find his party?"

"I can try," was the young hunter's response; "if they whipped the Ingins they're probably at our old camp, and I'll find them pretty quick; but if they got whipped, I may never find them, Graceful."

Grace bit her nether lip to keep back the emotions struggling for utterance.

"Joe," she finally said, "I will leave all to you; but would it not be as well to find them if you can; and let Captain Howard know where I am? They could help us out of our present trouble."

"I was just thinkin' 'bout huntin' the boys up, if they're to be found," replied Joe; "and since you've suggested it, I'll make a run up the river and see what I can find."

"If you should find Captain Howard, tell him to come to me at once, though it seems impossible that it is the Howard that I know—my friend, Ralph."

"I'll do that, Miss Graceful; and if I don't fall into the clutches of them rosy-nosed captors of yours, or the smut-faces of Ishtabaha, I'll try and report to you to-day. And so I guess I'd better be pinkin' out."

"May God speed you, Joe," the girl said.

In a few minutes the lad was ready to depart, and turning as he reached the door, he said:

"Good-by, Graceful; be awful keerful of yourself now, and don't get uneasy if I don't

come back to-day, so good-by—yes, and if it should quit stormin', Graceful, don't venture too fur from the palace, else the enemy might find your tracks. Good-by, Graceful."

"Good-morning, Joe," she replied.

"Oh, yes!" he suddenly exclaimed, as another thought entered his mind, "be careful 'bout makin' too big a fire if it should clear off. You see, the smoke comes out at a hole way up in the top of the tree, and it might attract attention. I believe that's all, so good-by, Graceful."

The young vagabond darted out of the snow-hut, and picking his way through the most open part of the woods—where the storm would soonest conceal his tracks—he reached the river and turned up the stream.

The snow was quite deep and still falling, though not so heavily as through the night. The weather was still quite warm for the latitude and season; and the falling snow was damp almost as slush, adhering to whatever it happened to touch.

Vagabond Joe plunged along whistling as merrily as though he were a veritable spirit of the storm. Now and then a gaunt hungry wolf, with its shaggy hair bedabbled, stole across his way, or a deer went lancing through the storm within easy range. But Joe paid little attention to these, further than to notice whether or not they evinced alarm of pursuit by man.

In the course of a few hours the lad arrived in the vicinity of the camp where he had left his friends. As soon as he had obtained a sight of the place, he saw that it was occupied; and in addition to the tents belonging to his friends, he saw that a number of snow-huts had been erected.

He had no difficulty in determining who the occupants were, for a number of savages could be seen stalking about from tent to hut, and hut to tent, their blankets drawn about their forms. From his covert, Vagabond watched them for some time; and among the party he discovered the chief, Ishtabaha, himself. Red Hand was there, also, moving about in all his savage dignity. And, finally, he saw a white man among the red-skins whom he readily recognized as the villain Captain Howard had called Dr. Burton Cudmore.

Our hero had intended to give the enemy's camp a wide berth, but, unfortunately, his presence was discovered by a party of Indians who were approaching the encampment from the north-east; and, acting upon the impulse of the moment, he determined to make the best of his situation, and bolting from his concealment, he started toward the camp, whistling as unconcernedly as though he were going among friends.

His presence, of course, created no little surprise and excitement in camp, for Red Hand and his warriors at once recognized him as the author of their troubles in the "dug-out" the night before. A little band of excited warriors had soon gathered around him. Some of them plied him with questions; others hurled cowardly threats at him; while others even dared to lay violent hands upon him.

"See here, red-skins," the lad exclaimed, "you needn't be makin' so much fuss over my rival. I'm not President Buckanan, and I'm none of your curiosities; but I'm Vagabond Joe."

"Waugh! big talk—little brave," said a warrior.

"Big brave—big run," Joe retorted, recognizing the Indian as one of his captors of the previous night.

Doctor Cudmore did not see Joe enter the camp, but when he saw the Indians gathering around some object of great curiosity, he made his way toward the noisy mob. When he saw Vagabond Joe in their midst, he turned to Ishtabaha, and asked:

"Why all this fuss over a boy, Ishtabaha?"

"Ugh!" ejaculated the chief, who spoke English poorly, but slang well; "the Vagabond Joe, white hunter boy—he bad pill—strong medicine."

"What!" exclaimed Cudmore, "do you mean to tell me that that little wet rat is Vagabond Joe?"

"Yes, sir'e, old rosy-nose," shouted Joe, who had overheard Cudmore's question. "I are Vagabond Joe; and if I arn't as big as the Ajax Mountains, and got a red light on the end of my nose, I guess I'm not a mouse."

"Well, what are you, anyhow, my little runt?" retorted Cudmore, regarding him with disdain.

"I'm a big boy simmered down into a small one, and if you don't believ'e it, why, you needn't, that's all. But I'd like to know what you're doin' here, stranger."

"I presume you would; then, again, I pre-

sume it's none of your business," retorted Cudmore. "But who sent you here to ask such questions?"

"I presume, ginaler, it's none of your business."

Cudmore seized the boy by the shoulder, and shook him fiercely. The savages roared with laughter.

Then the doctor, Red Hand and Ishtabaha stepped aside to confer in secret.

"He's a jolly ole rascal," exclaimed Joe to the Indians, as the white villain turned away. "I tell ye, red-skins, that man could make money if he'd let himself out as a light-house to the Coast Service. That bloomin' red nose of his'n, well lit up, with condensed fire-water, would beam gayly through the fog and darkness."

At this juncture a herd of deer, sweeping down through the woods near camp, attracted the attention of the Indians; and some of them immediately started in pursuit. While the excitement prevailed, a snowball took Dr. Cudmore, whack, upon the cheek, nearly breaking his jaw.

The doctor's fury and eyes at once gravitated toward Vagabond Joe; but when he saw that individual innocently looking after the fleeing deer, a question arose in his mind as to whether he had been the victim of a practical joke or an accident. At any rate, he knew not who had thrown the ball.

Presently he approached Joe and said:

"Young man, I understand that you were one of a party of hunters encamped here just yesterday."

"Well, what of it?" replied Joe.

"Come here," said Cudmore; and, leading him to one of the canvas tents, he drew aside the flap-door, and pointed to the body of a man lying upon a couch inside, apparently lifeless; "do you recognize that man, Vagabond Joe?"

"Great mollyhorns! it's Captain Howard!" cried the young hunter.

"Exactly, sir," replied Cudmore.

"Is he dead?" asks our hero.

"Not quite; but he got a blow on the head last night that laid him out for awhile. I may be able to patch him up and save his life, though it's doubtful. But, see here, Joe," and he closed the tent and drew the boy aside again, "do you know where the rest of your party is?"

"Not one of 'em," declared the boy.

"Don't lie to me, boy," threatened Cudmore. "Honor bright, lighthouse," with an earnest look in his big eyes.

"I want no impertinence, sir," retorted the man angrily, "or I'll slap your ears. Now tell me, how and when you were separated from your companions?"

"Well now, your excellency," replied Joe, scratching his head reflectively, "that's very easy told in this way: I was out scoutin' when the battle began last night, and bein' cut off from my friends, and of a peaceable nature, I shook the dust off of my moccasins and lit out. I don't want to fuss with the Ingins or anybody else."

"Wasn't you skulking around that tent, at a certain time last night?"

"Don't know as I was at—" began Joe.

"Answer my question, boy, yes or no," fiercely.

"No!" shouted Joe, then to himself he continued: "not at the hour I was building Crystal Palace for Miss Graceful."

Cudmore scrutinized the face of the boy as closely as though he were reading the youth's very thoughts in the impudent smile upon it.

"I believe you are lying, boy," he finally replied; "and now I want you to tell me, sir, whether or not, you, or any of your friends, helped a young woman to escape from that tent last night? Some one helped her away during the fight, and I am almost confident that you can throw some light on that matter. Did you or any of your friends help her away?"

"Wouldn't I be a fool to tell you, even if it were so? Now tell me that, Mr. Lighthouse?" was Joe's evasive reply. "I don't know what any of the boys done last night: but as for me, I had about all I could do to wiggle through with my own affairs. If this ere deluge keeps on, I'm goin' to build me an ark."

"I want none of your witticisms or impertinence, Vagabond Joe, or I will teach you something."

"Well, what the thunderation do you want, rubynose—a mug of corn-sap?"

"I want the truth out of you, and the truth I'll have," was the threatening response.

"S'pose it isn't in me?" calmly queried the boy.

"There's a way of instilling the truth into a

fractious youth, and I'm going to test it; for the truth I'm going to have, if I kill you. Here, boys, tie this young vagabond up to that tree, and I'll see what can be done for him."

He thought this mandate would frighten the lad; but he found he was mistaken. Joe never flinched, nor betrayed the least sign of submission or fear, by word or act.

And seeing he could not intimidate the young borderman, Cudmore repeated his order, when Ishtahaba gave orders for it to be fulfilled.

Joe was rudely seized and then tied up to a tree that stood hard by. This done, the clothing was stripped from his body to the waist, regardless of the driving storm. The falling snow melted upon his tender shoulders and ran down his back in cold drops. His slight form shivered, and the blue veins seen through the white, transparent skin seemed to grow black; still, the indomitable will of the brave boy never flinched.

Cudmore cut a long, heavy switch, or stick, which he passed through the fire to impart to it an extra degree of toughness, and make it more pliable. This done, he placed the gad in the hands of a great, brutal-looking renegade, at the same time quoting:

"Lay on, McDuff."

And d-d be he who first cries, hold—enough."

The renegade took the stick and a position ready to execute his inhuman cruelty. Before he began, Dr. Cudmore bade him wait a moment, then turning to Vagabond Joe, said:

"Now, boy, you can take your choice—fifty lashes or tell me the truth."

"Can you distinguish the truth from a falsehood?" asked Joe, with a defiant impertinence.

"Yes, I can, in a boy: now tell me if you know where there is a young girl, named Grace Manville, concealed."

"Yes, sir, I do," was the startling reply that came promptly from the youth's white, firm lips.

"Ah! he weakens! he weakens!" sneered Cudmore, rubbing his hands in devilish glee. "I thought I could prescribe for a patient suffering with the *anti-truth-opsy*. Hick'ry oil, well applied, is a sure remedy. Well now, Joseph, you've made a good beginning toward an honest man; and now, if you'll tell me where that girl is, or even promise to conduct me to where she is, I will let you off, *scot free*.

"Suppose I refuse?" answered Joe, still in no way disconcerted by fear of punishment.

"*You'll be whipped to death unless you do tell,*" was Cudmore's brutal reply.

"Then whip away," replied Joe, in a tone defying their power to force him to divulge the secret locked in his breast: "*for by the heavens above us, I will die before I will tell where Miss Graceful is concealed!*"

CHAPTER VIII.

GLENDALE.

YEARS previous to the opening of our story, the Sioux Indians occupying the country north, and the Sacs and Foxes, that south, waged a war of extermination upon each other. The conflict became so sanguinary as to make it necessary for Government to step in and stop the effusion of blood. Both tribes were very willing to accept terms of peace at the instance of a third party, and the result of this settlement was the formation of what was known as the Neutral Grounds of Iowa. Each tribe ceded to the United States, as evidence of their good intentions to hold inviolate the treaty, a strip of its territory twenty miles wide, and extending from the Mississippi river west to the Des Moines. This made a tract of neutral territory forty miles wide and four times that in length. South of the Neutral Ground dwelt the Sac and Fox; and north of it, the vindictive Sioux.

Each tribe entered into a solemn covenant with the Government never to hunt, nor even trespass upon its territory, and as the red-men were anxious for peace, the agreement was closely observed by both tribes.

Another result of this Government intervention was the opening of a paradise for the white hunters and trappers, and not a few settlers. As the Neutral Grounds included some of the best streams and bodies of timber in the State, where game abounded, scores of bordermen, with trap and rifle, took advantage of the new opening.

Among the very first settlers to enter the Neutral Ground was one Jeremiah Grimes, who came one day with several teams, servants and stock, and pitched his camp in the forest, northeast of where Fort Dodge was subsequently located. Grimes appeared to be a southern gentle-

man, though the few hunters and land-speculators who found their way to his home, learned nothing of his nativity or past life. His lips were completely sealed upon the subject, and some entertained little doubt of his being a fugitive from justice. At the same time, they were forced to admit that his face and open-handed hospitality bore no indications whatever of a guilty conscience; but there were many indications of a sad-hearted and sorrowing man, not only in the face, but in the melancholy and subdued tone of his voice.

That Jerry Grimes was a man of education and wealth, was evident from general appearance, and the air of social comfort surrounding his secluded home. He possessed a fine library, some rare paintings, and many other relics of taste and culture.

His servants, who were all negroes, numbered ten. There was not a woman among them. An old negro named Wallack performed the duties of housewife for his master, and few women could have done better under existing circumstances, especially in the culinary department.

Glendale comprised two cabins, a number of cattle sheds and a stable. The residence of Jerry Grimes was commodious for a frontier cabin. It consisted of two bedrooms, a sitting-room and kitchen besides the loft where Old Wallack had a "suit of rooms." The other cabin, a long low building, was the quarter of Grimes' servants.

Here, for years in, and years out, had dwelt Uncle Jerry Grimes—as he was better known thereabouts—and his servants, in strange isolation from the rest of the world. And as time rolled on, Uncle Jerry's head began to whiten, and his form to bend slightly under the weight of years and their secret sorrows. And at the same time decrepitude seemed to be coming on in advance of age, which was but further evidence of the inward cancer gradually gnawing away the supports of life.

But as time went on, a change seemed to come over the heart of Jerry Grimes. He began to pine for something—he knew not what. He grew anxious to have people come to see him, and one day, when two young gentlemen, giving their names as Henry Sampson and Isaiah Newbold—residence, Tennessee—called at his cabin and asked for lodging, the old man seemed transported with joy.

"It seems so good," he said in response to their call, "to have Tennessee folks under my roof, that I am willing they should remain a year, if they desire, without money or without price."

And so the Tennessee gentlemen found lodgings at Glendale.

Both of them were under thirty, and their general appearance denoted more than ordinary talent and force of character. Henry Sampson was of a very genial and affable disposition, and at once made a deep impression upon Uncle Jerry's regards. Isaiah Newbold was of a more distant and taciturn nature. Sampson was positive; Newbold negative. The one attracted, the other repelled.

They remained over night at Glendale, and the next morning they walked out into the woods with Uncle Jerry, conversing upon various topics. Uncle Jerry was not very communicative but was a good listener. In fact, he saw that his visitors were trying to draw him out, and this made him more guarded than he would otherwise have been. But, at length, Sampson turned suddenly and facing him said:

"Mr. Grimes, I don't know whether you have suspected us of being inquisitive or not; but if you have, I will tell you why it is we have plied you with so many questions: *we know who you are! we have been hunting for you over a year!*"

"What's that?" exclaimed the old recluse, considerably agitated. "You have been trailing old Jerry Grimes for years? What for? Have you a warrant for my arrest?"

"You surely do not fear arrest, do you?"

"No! I challenge the powers of earth to bring one charge against me that I am not willing to face openly, boldly."

"Our object, Uncle Jerry," said Mr. Sampson, "in hunting you up has been one of honor, as you must confess, when you have heard our story in full."

"Well, well; I am at a loss to know what it can be," said the old man, with an air of relief.

The three sat down upon a fallen tree-trunk.

"It is nothing criminal for which we have followed you," continued Sampson; "unless it is criminal to be the heir of a rich relative."

"Ah! money, then, has something to do with it?"

"Yes, and a big sum at that, Mr. Grimes."

"Money is a curse to any man. It makes more

sorrow and trouble than happiness and comfort," replied the old man, thoughtfully; "but go on with your story, Mr. Sampson."

"Well, the story is short: your mother's only brother died in Scotland three years ago, leaving an immense fortune to you."

"Ah! Uncle Thomas Campbell dead?" exclaimed Mr. Grimes.

"Yes; and I have the papers here to show for what I tell you," replied Sampson, producing some documents. "They were placed in my hands by the administrator's American solicitors, Messrs. Delton and Hewitte, of New Orleans. It appears that your uncle, Thomas Campbell, knew nothing of any relative but yourself; and after giving half of his wealth to various institutions of learning and charity, he willed the rest to you—nearly a quarter of a million dollars. So you see, Mr. Grimes, that you are immensely rich."

"Ay, but it will not purchase food—food for the heart, and of which I have been starving for years. Riches have been a curse to me—riches and woman. I loved once, and my love was encouraged by a woman who appeared to reciprocate my affections; but I soon found it was my wealth that attracted her. When I discovered this, my love turned to hatred. All women seemed to add new force to this unnatural dislike, and I resolved to forever quit the presence of woman. That resolution drove me here into the wilds of the West—away from home, civilization and all its comforts. But, after all, I find that I still have a human heart, and that it seeks an affinity—some one to love. But wealth will not bring that boon now. It will only be an encumbrance to my already burdensome life."

"Have you no relatives, Mr. Grimes?" asked Newbold.

"Yes—that is, I did have, though they may be dead now. I once had three sisters, Ruth, Margery and Naomi. They lived in Kentucky, but that was twenty years ago, and I have not heard of any of them since. I presume they were married and may all be living yet, and if so, I shall turn my newly acquired fortune over to them. If they are dead, they may have children living to whom the money will be just as acceptable."

"But, in the first place, Mr. Grimes, you would have to prove that you are the true Jerry Grimes and heir of the said Thomas Campbell, late deceased."

"Well, gentlemen, I will think the matter over a day or two. I presume you would like to take a day or so's rest before leaving; and in that time I will come to some conclusion."

"Very well," replied Sampson, "we will await your decision. You will not necessarily have to go to Scotland to arrange your affairs. You can do this at New Orleans with Messrs. Delton and Hewitte."

The three returned to the house. Sampson and Newbold remained at Glendale two days, and, in the meantime, Uncle Jerry Grimes had concluded to accompany them to New Orleans; so on the third day the three departed.

In six weeks they arrived in New Orleans, and in a few days more Jerry Grimes had established his right to his deceased relative's bequest. But, after all, he was no happier. He could not buy the love for which his heart was thirsting; and so he at once returned to his secluded home on the western prairie.

Before leaving New Orleans, however, he took Henry Sampson and Isaiah Newbold into his confidence, and intrusted the duty of searching for his three sisters to them. His object in this was to bestow the inheritance of his uncle upon them or their heirs.

The old man had conceived a great respect for Mr. Sampson, and felt safe in placing this matter in his hands; for it was one involving nearly a quarter of a million dollars. For their labor, each of the men was to receive handsome pay out of the inheritance after their labor had been successfully completed. They felt so positive of finding Mr. Grimes' sisters, or their children, that they agreed to charge nothing for their labor if they did not succeed in their search.

The money coming to Mr. Grimes from his uncle was already on deposit in the Bank of Edinburg; and as soon as his sisters, or their heirs, had been found and identity fully established, this was to be equally divided among them upon the certificate of Messrs. Sampson and Newbold setting forth all facts, to Mr. Grimes, connected with the families of his sisters. When fully satisfied that the rightful heirs had been presented, Uncle Jerry was to provide each—through Messrs. Delton and Hewitte—with a bill of exchange, for his or her share of the fortune, upon the Edinburg Bank. It was really intrusting a great deal to the

honesty of strangers. It is true, Delton and Hewitte had given bond for the faithful performance of their duty; but to Sampson and Newbold's honesty all was intrusted with great confidence, by Jerry Grimes.

Month after month went by, and, to Uncle Jerry's surprise, he heard nothing from any of his agents. He had no doubt but what his sisters could be easily found; but in this he seemed to have been mistaken, for two years passed before he heard a single word of any of them. Then he received a letter from Henry Sampson stating that after constant search, he and Newbold had been enabled to find but one heir, Greene Lamar, the daughter of his, Jerry's, sister Ruth. Ruth and her husband, he wrote, were both dead, and Irene had been adopted by her father's sister with whom she was then living. From Irene Mr. Sampson had learned that her aunt Naomi had married clandestinely, and leaving Kentucky had never been heard of since. Margery had married a northern gentleman, and left the State also; and years afterward Irene heard that her husband had died, that she married again and went West. Further than this he had learned nothing, but wrote that he had sent Isaiah Newbold West to continue the search.

About this time Newbold himself put in his appearance at Glendale, and informed Mr. Grimes that he had given up the search for the present, and, with one Sampson Carew, had opened a land-office in Fort Dodge.

Jerry Grimes answered Sampson's letter, making particular inquiry about his niece, Irene Lamar. In reply Mr. Sampson wrote:

"Irene is a very beautiful young lady with fine accomplishments and a pleasant, sunny nature. She is just such a niece, Mr. Grimes, as would fill up that void in your heart, for you could not help loving her. And since I have told her all about the uncle of whom she had heard so little, and the fortune that he wished to bestow upon her, she seemed transported with joy. The people with whom she lives have lately met with a reverse of fortune, and are now very poor; and as Irene no longer wishes them to be burdened with her support, I have advised her to go out West and make her home with you; and, although she is to be married to an estimable young man within the coming year, she has concluded to visit Glendale; and if it should be your wish, make her home there until she has gained a home of her own by marriage."

Uncle Jerry shouted with joy when he read this letter. He wrote at once to his niece, Irene Lamar, in regard to coming West. He urged her to come by all means, and not to delay it a day.

The old man was again made happy, and in his letter he looked upon and described the bright side of everything. He painted the glories of the great West in gorgeous colors, and located paradise around Glendale.

In her reply, Irene seemed transported with joy, and manifested great eagerness to be with him. She stated, in the same letter, that she would leave Tennessee about the first of the following December, and would endeavor to be at Glendale in time to spend the holidays.

As the time for her arrival drew near, Uncle Jerry began preparations for her reception. He dispatched teams to the nearest Mississippi town for furniture and household fixtures and adornments, and when these had all been put in order, with the assistance of some of the good women of Fort Dodge, his cabin seemed transformed into a palace.

Meanwhile, Isaiah Newbold, the land-agent, had called frequently at Glendale. In fact, he had become a sort of confidential friend of Mr. Grimes, much to the distrust of the Fort Dodge settlers, for this class of people in those days held no particular respect for land-agents. Newbold was in constant communication with his old friend, Henry Sampson, and so, of course, he knew all that was going on. To Uncle Jerry he always held out a hope that he would yet find him other heirs than Irene Lamar. He claimed that he was secretly at work, through different agents, searching out the whereabouts of his sister Margery, and that he might at any day surprise him with some happy development.

He claimed that he had sufficient evidence of Margery having come West after her marriage with her second husband, one John Kenelm; and his statement was corroborated by Henry Sampson in his letters to Uncle Jerry.

As the holidays approached, the coming of the young heiress, Irene Lamar, became the all-absorbing topic at Fort Dodge, and a looked-for happy event at Glendale. Mr. Grimes had not

only made arrangements to give his niece a kind and happy reception, but his neighbors also; and so it was an event calculated to break the dull monotony of pioneer life among the settlers, and create a feeling of ardent, expectant joy.

CHAPTER IX.

PRETTY MISS LAMAR.

ISAIAH NEWBOLD and his partner, Simon Carew, sat in their little office—a wooden structure which had once been a part of Government barracks—discussing, in earnest tones, the social party coming off at Glendale as soon as Miss Lamar arrived from the South. Newbold manifested considerable interest in the young heiress, and Carew accused him of having already fallen in love with her, or of holding designs against her wealth. To this Isaiah replied:

"I presume Sampson has won that girl's heart ere this, for he was a lady's man, besides being a fortune-hunter. I hope he will not accompany her to Glendale, for fear he strikes my trail. He's keen of scent as a sleuth-hound, and if he should strike the track of Margery Kenelm, I might as well haul off. I told Uncle Jerry that I was upon the trail of his sister and her husband, and that I might make a discovery at any day. You see, Simon, I have a full history of Margery's life from the time she went North to live, until she married her second husband, John Kenelm, and went West. A boy was given her in birth before leaving the North, and this is all that I know of them. After crossing the Mississippi they seemed to have disappeared as if by magic. Moreover, I have a picture of Margery that I procured of the family of her first husband. But mind, I tell you, I have kept all this to myself, and will not present it until I find the heir of Margery Kenelm. My opinion now is, that I can lay my hand upon her boy at any moment; and after Miss Irene has been fully established in her wild-wood home, I will see what can be done."

"Exactly," responded Carew, drumming upon the table with his fingers, and arching his eyebrows.

At this juncture three men and a boy entered the office of Newbold and Carew. They were, apparently, all strangers, and well bundled up in buffalo overcoats and beaver caps.

The boy was the only one among them calculated to attract attention. He could not have been over fifteen years of age, and possessed a face and complexion as fair and delicate as any maiden's. And when the youth removed his mittens and held his hands out before the fire burning on the hearth, Mr. Carew noticed that they were small and shapely.

"Rather rough weather, gentlemen," said one of the callers, as he removed his cap and shook the snow from it over the fire.

"I should say it was," replied Newbold.

"Rather discouraging to men who have been accustomed to a milder climate, but desirous of securing homes in the great West," added the first visitor.

"Then you are in search of land, eh?" asked Carew.

"Yes; and we have called to make some inquiry regarding the lands you have to sell."

"It will be our delight to wait on you, gentlemen, and give any information you may desire, whether it is to our interest or not. Of course, there are few claims for sale, but nearly all the surrounding lands are for pre-emption. If you would like to go into the country and look at the lay of the land, its natural resources, and so forth, I will drive you out in my sleigh. I will admit, it is the worst season of the year to get a good impression of these untamed prairies. If you conclude to take a claim, we will make out your application and charge you a small fee for the same; but nothing for driving you over the country. It is our aim to encourage emigration, and by-and-by we will make some money."

"Well," said one of the "land-sharks," "we have come a long ways to look at your country, and would like to take a drive this afternoon wherever you may elect."

"Very well; I will take you down as far as Dick Henslee's place and back to-day. I have got to be here by dark, for a young lady is expected on the stage from the South, and I have engaged to carry her over to her uncle's place a few miles from here."

A smile passed over Carew's face, and the boy seated before the fire smiled, also, as he glanced up at the faces of his friends.

The land-buyers finally returned to the Waukonas Hotel, and in the course of an hour or two, Newbold drove down in a long sleigh or sled, and taking them in, dashed away through the village southward.

About sunset he returned alone, having left his passengers, he said, at Dick Henslee's place, from whence they would go southward the next day.

It had been snowing off and on all day, and when night set in, the snow-fall became more furious. This was deeply deplored on account of making the stage late, and spoiling the anticipated good-time at Glendale; for it was a well-settled fact that Miss Irene Lamar would arrive that evening, when all were to proceed in merry procession from the settlement up to Glendale.

However, Mr. Newbold kept his spirited team harnessed to his cutter, and the merry jingle of his sleigh-bells kept alive the hope of the village—stirring old blood and young alike.

To the happy disappointment of all, the stage—now upon runners instead of wheels—dashed into the village at a few minutes past the usual hour, and of the two passengers it brought, one was Irene Lamar and the other her escort, an elderly gentleman and friend named Doyle, who had accompanied her to the West upon business.

Isaiah Newbold at once took Miss Lamar and Mr. Doyle into his conveyance and started for Glendale through the storm, followed by a number of other sleds and sleighs filled with happy old folks and merry youngsters.

Two hours' driving brought them to the home of the old recluse, when Irene and Mr. Doyle were conducted into the cabin by Newbold and introduced to Uncle Jerry Grimes.

The meeting of the maiden and her uncle was an affectionate one—never to be forgotten by those who witnessed it. Uncle Jerry laughed and wept by turns as he stood with his pretty niece clasped to his breast, feeling, at last, that he had some one to love. He gazed down into her face, regarding it with that deep, thoughtful interest that a child regards a new toy. In her great brown eyes, fair, patrician features and the music of her woman's voice, he endeavored to trace some resemblance to her dead mother. But in this he failed; still he loved Irene none the less for seeing no family resemblance in her face; and what was wanting in making the joy of their meeting complete, the old man expected time and a better acquaintance to supply.

The guests having all arrived they were introduced to the new mistress of Glendale, when a very happy entertainment followed.

It was midnight before the last of the guests had departed; and when Uncle Jerry and his niece at length found themselves alone, they began talking over matters concerning their past history.

Uncle Jerry told her how he had once loved a fair, but faithless woman; and how, after he had been deceived and his love turned to hatred, he had renounced women and society forever, and sought the seclusion of his present home. Here for twenty years had he dwelt; and for seventeen of these years had all the world beyond him been a blank. He had never heard of any of his friends until he heard that his uncle, Thomas Campbell was dead. He knew not what had become of his sisters until apprised of their death and disappearance by Henry Sampson. Nor could Irene tell him any more than he already knew. She had been left fatherless and motherless when a mere babe, and knew nothing of her mother's people until she met Mr. Sampson.

Aside from their relationship, Uncle Jerry and Irene Lamar were as strangers to each other, up to the moment they met under the roof at Glendale.

The maiden filled a great deal of the void in her uncle's heart. She appeared to be as kind and affectionate as she was beautiful. She was keen of perception, and sought out the old man's whims that she might favor them. In this way she took possession of her uncle's heart, and, as the mistress of Glendale, moved a queen of matchless beauty before him.

But after all, the old man was not entirely happy. Something, he knew not what, seemed undone, neglected. He endeavored to shake off this spell that made him restless in the midst of joy; but all was in vain, for day after day it grew upon him.

CHAPTER X.

SECRET OF A SILENT CONVERSATION.

THE day following Irene Lamar's arrival at Glendale was wild and blustery; yet, despite the inclemency of the weather, Isaiah Newbold drove down to Uncle Jerry's and spent most of the day with the old gentleman and his niece. It was a pleasure now to call at the home of the recluse, for it seemed transformed from one of shadows and sadness, to one of sunshine and joy.

Despite the social company, comforts and

pleasure Irene had left behind, she seemed well satisfied in her new home.

Uncle Jerry did not leave her presence for any length of time during Newbold's visit. He felt suspicious of the land-agent's smiles and affable conversation, and determined to guard the maiden's heart with jealous care. He believed Newbold had already conceived a regard for her stronger than mere friendship; and should this become mutual between him and Irene, he would soon find himself alone again in the world. It had slipped the old man's mind that Sampson had written that Irene was already engaged to some one in Tennessee. Irene had said nothing of this to him, else he would have entertained no fears of Mr. Newbold's designs upon her heart.

In a few days Myrtle Gray visited Glendale to see Miss Lamar, and a warm attachment sprung up between the two girls. In fact, the soft, witching blue eyes, the serene loveliness, and sweet, childlike innocence of Myrtle Gray were irresistible to the most sober and matter-of-fact nature. Every one who chanced to meet her, loved her because she was the embodiment of maidenly kindness and simple beauty. On the other hand, Myrtle seemed to love every one, and yet there was one that she loved more than all others, and that was our hero, Vagabond Joe.

As it was holidays-time, and there was no school, Myrtle had, by Uncle Jerry's most urgent request, come over to spend several days at Glendale. The old man was desirous of throwing every influence possible around Irene to win her heart and mind from her Southern associations; and he could think of no better way to do this than by opening the doors of his house to the young people of the village. He knew Irene would love Myrtle; and knowing that ever yearning desire of a young girl for a bosom friend and confidant of her own sex, he felt certain that in Miss Gray his niece would find this indispensable friend of girlhood.

Of evenings, during Myrtle's visit at Glendale, Old Wallack, Uncle Jerry's old-time servant, brought in his violin and banjo, and played and sung some of those old, soul-stirring negro melodies which never fail to reach the heart. To the music, Myrtle listened like one enchanted; while Irene was always affected to tears by the recollections of the past brought up by the sad, plaintive melody.

Christmas eve Isaiah Newbold again came over to Glendale. Myrtle was there, and, after the general events of the day—particularly the storm—had been discussed at length, Wallack brought out his fiddle to entertain his friends with music.

At the suggestion of Irene, he played and sang that familiar old song, dear to every Southern heart, "The Old Folks at Home."

All listened, apparently enraptured, and when the last note had died away, a repetition of the song was called for; and as the music again swelled out in a plaintive symphony, Myrtle Gray was not a little surprised to detect a strange smile hovering about the face of Newbold, and to see him and Irene exchange glances now and then that seemed fraught with some silent meaning.

Of what was passing between the land-agent and his niece, Myrtle saw Uncle Jerry was totally oblivious; and, in fact, it was only through the keen eyes of girlish curiosity that she had noticed it. But now that she had, she could not help watching the movements of the couple. She noticed Newbold regarded Irene with a rather familiar admiration, and that she returned his looks in a manner not altogether consistent with her—Myrtle's—views of womanly propriety. Still Myrtle would have thought nothing particular of this had she not suddenly discovered them carrying on a silent conversation by means of the mute's language of signs, with which she was conversant herself, having learned it of a deaf and dumb friend.

How it happened that these two persons—strangers to each other—had discovered each other's knowledge of the language of signs, was somewhat of a mystery to Myrtle. It could not have come about by accident; and yet it seemed impossible to have been otherwise.

Myrtle's woman instinct and maiden delicacy at once rebelled against what seemed to her a breach of the strictest honor of a young lady and womanly propriety. She considered such actions with a stranger, as she knew Mr. Newbold to be, altogether very improper.

Myrtle sat where she could see both of them without attracting their attention; and when Irene's fingers were moving in the language of signs, she saw that the speaker's eyes were not fixed upon Newbold, but turned toward the fire,

or her uncle, as if drinking in the sweet melody of Old Wallack's voice and instrument. In the meantime, however, she saw that Newbold's eyes were riveted upon Irene's fingers; and when it came his turn to reply, his eyes wandered about the room as if upon guard, while Irene's eyes were fixed upon his fingers, whose movements many would have believed came from that natural impulse which causes the foot to beat and the fingers to drum in unison with the sound of music.

Although condemning this secret conversation, Myrtle could not resist the temptation to read what was being said; and the very first sentence that she read caused a shudder to run through her veins, and her face to turn white, though she skillfully mastered her emotions. Newbold was speaking; and this is what Myrtle interpreted his signs to read:

"I will leave it on the window-sill outside when I leave. Mind, it is deadly poison."

When he had concluded, Newbold turned his face toward Irene, who replied:

"What is it in?"

Newbold answered:

"In a small vial."

"How is it to be administered?" Irene next asked.

"In vapor," was Newbold's reply, easily read by the watchful Myrtle. "Mix it with the fat in the lamp which is kept burning of nights in his bedroom. It will cause death in a few weeks and leave no trace of poison in the system."

Again a chill of horror convulsed the slight, delicate form of Myrtle Gray, and she could scarcely suppress the cry that rose to her lips.

Was it possible, she thought, that while Old Wallack's inspired strains of music were holding a rapturous silence within the room, Newbold and the lovely Irene were plotting some horrible deed through the medium of the language of signs? Was it possible that their ears were deaf and their hearts dumb to all that was beautiful in woman and noble in man? Were they demons in the guise of female beauty and the form of man?

Myrtle Gray, child that she was, experienced a sense of dreadful fear stealing over her when she revolved these thoughts in her mind. She knew these people were either amusing themselves in a conversation that betrayed a gross mind, or else they were concocting a foul, revolting conspiracy against some one of Uncle Jerry's household, if not Uncle Jerry himself.

A lull in the music broke the conversation of the two silent talkers, when a few minutes' chat followed, in which all engaged. But, presently, Newbold suggested that Old Wallack play a favorite piece of his, and as soon as the music started up, the keen-eyed Myrtle saw Newbold and Irene resume their "sign-talking." Newbold was the first to speak, as it were, and Miss Gray read these words:

"Has he said anything of what he intends you to have out of that Scotland legacy?"

"Nothing yet," she saw Irene reply; when Newbold continued:

"I presume the presence of death will remind him of his promise to Sampson and me."

Again Myrtle shuddered, for she had discovered the whole drift of their conversation. It seemed that Irene was not content to be the heir apparent to her uncle's wealth, but wished to come into possession of it immediately, and that, too, by foul means. At least, this is exactly what she made out of what had passed between the plotters; and yet, it seemed impossible for Irene to do such a deed, and so Myrtle finally came to the conclusion that she had done Irene and Mr. Newbold injustice in suspecting them of wrong, and concluded that they had only been amusing themselves, as young people are wont to do sometimes very foolishly.

About ten o'clock Newbold took his departure for home, and the door had scarcely closed upon him ere Myrtle arose and went out. The snow was still falling and the wind moaning above the tree-tops. For a moment the timid maiden paused upon the door-step; but, gathering courage, she pushed her way around to the window, determining to ascertain beyond a single doubt, whether or not Newbold left a vial, as he said he would. She ran her fingers along the window-sill, and to her surprise, found a small package done up in a paper. She knew by the feel of it that it contained a small vial, and as she now realized the truth of the whole situation, she grew faint and sick at heart.

Placing the package in her pocket, she took a handful of snow and washed her face with it to cool her flushed, feverish brow; then, calming her emotions, she bounded back into the room like a sprite, her cheeks red as roses, her eyes

beaming with a smile, and the crystal snow-flakes sparkling among her flowing yellow hair.

"Why, you rosy-cheeked little chit," laughed Irene, "how dare you rush out in such a storm?"

"It's delicious, Irene!" replied Myrtle; "I'd like to go out and romp in the storm," and she daintily shook the tangled snow-flakes from her flossy tresses.

Presently Irene opened the door and looked out into the night.

"What a frightful storm," she said; "but I'm going to show you that I'm as brave as you are, Miss Myrtle."

So saying she stepped out into the storm; but in a minute she returned. Myrtle noticed that her face wore a look of disappointment; but to divert her attention, she said:

"I do wonder if Old Santa Claus will bring us anything to-night, Irene?"

"Oh, no; I presume Old Santa don't bother about coming out among the heathens," responded Irene. "Besides, none but little folks get presents from Santa."

"I'm little folks," laughed Myrtle.

"Harkee!" exclaimed Uncle Jerry, who had opened the door and stood looking out into the storm.

All listened, and heard, quite distinctly, the jingle of bells coming down the night.

"He's coming, Myrtle!" exclaimed Irene.

"Somebody's coming," added Uncle Jerry.

The sound of the bells seemed familiar to Myrtle and she ventured to open the door, and, shading her eyes with her hand, peer out into the gloom.

The next moment the merry bells came crashing up to the very door of the house and stopped.

The light streaming out through the darkness and snow revealed the forms of a pair of elks harnessed to a light cutter, their great white antlers branching out like ghostly arms to seize you.

"Ho-p," exclaimed a young, merry voice behind the animals; and the next moment a low, heavy-set figure, clothed in a fur cap and coat, to which the snow was clinging in ragged shreds, appeared in the doorway of the cabin.

"Evening, evening," the stranger exclaimed, glancing about the room—at Uncle Jerry, at Myrtle, and Irene upon whom he permitted his gaze to linger for a moment.

The intruder's cap was drawn down to his eyes and his collar was turned so that all but his blazing eyes was concealed from view.

"I golly! dat am Ole Sainty Clawses, true as I se a born nigger!" exclaimed Old Wallack, his eyes distended with wonder and surprise.

The stranger laughed softly under his disguise, shook himself like a great, woolly dog, then replied:

"A wild night, a wild night! but, then, you have all got a warm, cozy place in there."

"Wont you come in?" asked Uncle Jerry.

"Oh, satyrs, no! I hav'n't time—just called to look in upon you and—and leave a present for little Myrtle Gray."

Myrtle's eyes brightened and she advanced toward the stranger, a smile of recognition lighting up her pretty face.

The stranger extended his hand ungloved, and placed something in that of the maiden's, then he exclaimed:

"A merry Christmas to you, and your friends," and with a bow he disappeared from the door, sprung into his sleigh and dashed away through the night and storm.

"Some one personating Santa Claus, by Jovel and he does it well," declared Uncle Jerry.

"Who could it have been?" asked Irene, remembering how he fixed his burning gaze upon her.

"I couldn't say, niece," was Uncle Jerry's reply; "but what did he leave you, Miss Myrtle?"

"A gold ring!" exclaimed the maiden, her eyes and cheeks glowing with emotions of delight.

"I declare, it is a real beauty," said Irene.

"I am sure, Santa Claus is partial of his gifts; though I am inclined to think you are an especial favorite of his, Miss Myrtle."

Myrtle smiled, as she coyly slipped the golden hoop upon her finger.

After discussing the visit of Santa Claus at Glendale for some time, Uncle Jerry retired, and in a few minutes Irene and Myrtle followed his example. The latter occupied a chamber together; and while dressing, Irene saw a small package drop out of Myrtle's pocket upon the carpeted floor. Seeing Myrtle did not notice it, Irene picked it up and turning to the light, unrolled the package and found a small

vial inside. It was filled with a grayish powder, and labeled "poison."

A thought flashed through Irene's brain in an instant, and rolling up the vial in the paper, she placed it in a little cabinet on the toilet stand, and retired.

And still Myrtle was entirely ignorant of her loss, and was unable to account for the uneasiness that caused Irene to toss and moan in her sleep.

The next morning when the maidens had arisen and dressed themselves, Irene took the vial from the cabinet and turning to Myrtle said:

"Myrtle, I want you to tell me one thing, and tell me truly: where did you get this vial?"

Myrtle looked astonished.

"Where did you get it?" she replied, feeling in her pocket unthoughtedly.

"It fell out of your pocket last night while you were disrobing," replied Irene, a little imperative.

Myrtle was so confused that she could scarcely utter a word. The absence of the package from her pocket told her that her attempt to conceal the poison had been detected; and the only way out of it was to make a confession of all.

"I found it upon the window-sill where Mr. Newbold left it," she replied, trembling with fear and doubt.

Irene's eyes flashed with indignation; her cheeks paled and her white lips quivered as she replied:

"How did you know Mr. Newbold left it there?"

Myrtle held up her little hand and with her fingers flashed off the reply:

"I read all that passed between you and Newbold."

A smothered cry burst from Irene's lips, and a dreadful fear seized upon her young heart. She threw herself upon the bed and burst into tears. Kind-hearted little Myrtle endeavored to relieve her of her overwrought feelings by gentle words. But they seemed only to add fuel to the flames, for presently Irene arose with flashing eyes and bloodless lips, and, through her white teeth, fairly hissed:

"Myrtle Gray, you are a treacherous, deceitful little wretch!"

"Oh, Irene, do not get mad at me," plead Myrtle, her innocent blue eyes filling with tears; "you surely did not mean to do wrong."

"Wrong?" she fairly screamed, her eyes blazing with scorn, "why did you not tell me that you knew the language of signs?"

"I never thought of it until I saw you and Mr. Newbold conversing."

"And then, little eavesdropper that you were, you sat still and read all that was said!"

"I could not well help it, Irene," replied Myrtle.

"That is a very poor excuse, indeed, and does not harmonize with your attempt to conceal this vial. What object had you in going out and securing it, and saying nothing about it to me?"

"I see you mistrust me, Irene?"

"Of what?"

"Of suspecting you."

"Your actions and evasions are evidence of the fact; and yet all your fears and suspicions are lavished upon a very small matter, since Mr. Newbold and I conversed in riddles. The poison in this vial was brought by my request. I wanted it to rid the place of those pests of my life—Uncle Jerry's pet coons and wolves."

Myrtle reflected. She affected credulity in what Irene told her, though she really believed the handsome heiress was trying to deceive her.

"I thought it impossible," she said, "for you to be so wicked as to commit a crime, Irene; though I did not know pet coons and wolves slept with a light by their bedsides."

There was considerable woman's keen sarcasm in the little miss's reply; and the haughty Miss Lamar felt its sting with a woman's sensitiveness. With a look of unutterable scorn, the latter turned and swept out of the room.

Poor Myrtle Gray was now in a desperate situation—the neglected guest of the haughty Irene. She dressed herself and went out into the room where Uncle Jerry sat reading before the fire.

"I wish you a merry Christmas, Uncle Jerry," she exclaimed.

"Oh-ho!" said Uncle Jerry, glancing up over his spectacles; "thank you, Myrtle, thank you. I hope you and Irene will have a merry day of it."

"I believe I will go home to-day, Uncle Jerry," she said.

"Why, child! what's the matter? homesick? I thought you were going to stay a whole week with us. Got tired of Glendale, have you?"

"No, I am not tired of Glendale; but then circumstances have changed my mind, and I believe I will go home."

Uncle Jerry tried to coax her out of this notion, but finding his efforts were all in vain, he said:

"Well, if go you will, I'll have old Shellbark harnessed to the sleigh after breakfast, and take you home."

And so he did, though he mistrusted nothing of what had taken her home all at once, until they came to part in front of her father's cabin, when she turned to him and said:

"Uncle Jerry, be careful of your sleeping-apartments, and have them well ventilated, for I earnestly believe there is a conspiracy on foot against your life."

"What's that?" exclaimed Uncle Jerry.

But Myrtle was gone; and as the door of the cabin closed upon her form, the old man gave Shellbark the reins and started homeward, his peace of mind disturbed by the maiden's warning.

CHAPTER XI.

THE RESULT OF INDIAN POLICY.

We left Vagabond Joe tied to a tree in the camp of Ishtahaba, about to undergo a cruel torture for refusing to reveal the hiding-place of Grace Manville. When he declared that he would suffer death rather than betray the fair girl into their power, Dr. Cudmore turned to the burly renegade who stood ready with the whip, and said:

"Lay on the bastinado—lay on, McDuff!"

The renegade stepped forward, raised the gad, and was about to bring it down upon the youth's tender, quivering back, when Ishtahaba stepped in before him and said:

"The boy is brave; he will die rather than tell where the maiden is concealed; then both will be gone. Let the pale-face man lower his whip."

With a look of bitter disappointment, the renegade did as commanded.

Then Ishtahaba took Cudmore aside, and addressed him thus:

"Vagabond Joe is as brave as he is cunning; but Ishtahaba is cunning also. Let the boy go. We will then put watches upon him, and when he returns to the spot where the maiden is concealed, then will we capture both."

"Ay, your head is long, chief," replied Cudmore, pleased with the Indian's idea; "there is policy in what you suggest. Of course, the little rascal will go back to where he left the woman. I will have him released before he freezes to death."

And he went back and ordered Joe's release. As the youth replaced his clothing upon his shivering form, he said:

"I reckon as what you come to the conclusion I wasn't as skeery as a fawn, didn't you, Mr. Lighthouse?"

"I will take no insolence from you, Vagabond Joe," said Cudmore. "I give you your freedom, and I advise you to make good use of it in getting away from here."

"I'll do so, rosy-nose," retorted Joe, "and jist you mind, if ever you cross my path again, I'll slip a bee into your bonnet."

So saying, Joe took up his rifle and left camp, going down the river.

And he was scarcely out of sight of camp ere two Indians, called Slyly and Keen-Eyes—sly, cunning warriors—were sent out upon his trail to watch him. But Joe was a match for the cunning of any Indian. He knew very well that they would never have suffered him to go free had there not been an object in it. And that object he readily guessed, and determined to act accordingly. He did not betray any suspicions by glancing back nor around him, as if expecting to be followed; but traveling as fast as possible, he passed on by the spot where Grace Manville was concealed toward Fort Dodge. Nor did he stop until he reached his trapper home late that night, situated upon the Neutral Grounds, north-east of Glendale.

Here he lingered but a short time. He regaled himself upon the pantry stores of his friends, changed his clothing, and cleaned up his weapons.

Out in a shed hard by were two fine, large elks, the especial property of Vagabond Joe. They were perfectly docile, and well trained to the harness; and when Joe was ready to return to the valley of the Lizard, he harnessed them to a light cutter—the result of his own mechanical genius—put in some feed for them, and then

mounting into the vehicle, dashed off through the storm, guiding his elks by a line attached to their horns.

The youth made his way directly toward Glendale, and in an hour's time drew up in front of Uncle Jerry Grimes' residence. To his surprise he was met in the doorway by one whom he had not expected to see there—Miss Myrtle Gray. But recovering his self-composure, he drew from his pocket a ring which he had long intended as a Christmas present for her, and slipped it into her hand. Meanwhile, he kept himself disguised, and while he was paying his respects to Myrtle, he was enabled to gratify the secret curiosity that had taken him to Uncle Jerry's house.

Leaving Glendale, Joe made his way to the Des Moines, up which he traveled until he reached the mouth of the Lizard, when he turned and made his way up this latter stream, traveling altogether upon the frozen surface.

He traveled rapidly despite the depth of the snow. The elks, strong of limb and possessed of an almost endless endurance, plunged steadily along through the storm as though it were their own element.

Vagabond Joe, bundled up in blankets and furs, sat silent and motionless listening to the crunching and grinding of the snow under the runners of his sleigh.

On either side of him the woods rose up a black wall. The storm shrieked overhead, while the river, with muffled voice, rolled beneath.

Never breaking that long striding trot peculiar to the animal, the elks glided on, patiently obeying the will of their young master.

Daylight at length dawned, and for the first time in many hours it ceased to snow; though, the wind rising, began to whirl and drive the snow through the air in blinding clouds, making it all the worse for our young friend. Still there was no great loss without some small gain; the drifting snow filled the team's track within a minute after it was made, and should an enemy happen to cross this track, he would not be very likely to detect it.

Continuing on until within a mile of where he had left Grace Manville, he left the river and struck out into the timber. Here he found traveling far more difficult and laborious—his elks having to plunge through snow nearly belly-deep—over the rough wooded hills and valleys. But pressing onward he finally neared the place where he had left the fair stranger concealed.

Driving his team under the snow-laden boughs of a tree, surrounded by a dense thicket of hazel bushes, he hitched it; then upon foot he set off toward the Crystal Palace of which he was architect and builder.

Before he had come in sight of the structure his attention was arrested by two Indians who were moving along some distance before him, and at right-angles with his course. They were carrying some heavy burden between them, and as it was white with snow, Joe at first took it to be a deer; but, upon closer scrutiny, he discovered it was something rolled up in a blanket, and handled very carefully by the red-skins.

The young borderman was thrown into a quandary by this discovery, although his apprehensions did not assume serious form. Still he could not let the red-skins pass out of sight without knowing what they were carrying. This curiosity came of the natural precaution of a frontiersman or Indian-fighter. It was always a point closely observed by the latter that when he found an Indian engaged in anything doubtful the same would always bear investigation. Joe thought the two warriors might be carrying a prisoner between them, although it never once occurred to him that that prisoner might be Grace Manville. They were not coming exactly from the right direction to arouse suspicion as to her capture; and yet such a thing might be possible, and so he determined to inquire into the matter before the red-skins passed out of his sight.

He moved away after the Indians, who traveled north until they had reached the river, when they turned west, following the river upon the ice. At this point there was no timber on the north bank of the stream to break the storm; and the wind, sweeping down from the icy north, drove the cutting blast into the Indians' faces; but, nothing daunted, they drew their blankets over their heads and trudged heavily and slowly on through the snow with their burden.

Meanwhile, Vagabond Joe stole cautiously along after them.

Great volumes of snow were whirled and twisted through the air in writhing clouds, as thick and blinding as the simoons of Sahara—making it, at times, almost impossible to

Vagabond Joe.

breathe. The air, too, was growing keen, and Joe's ears and fingers began to tingle with frost. He had no difficulty in keeping in sight of the fatigued and heavily-laden savages; and it was with a feeling of some delight that he finally saw them sink down, apparently exhausted by the weight of their burden and the inclemency of the weather.

Joe stopped, and, burrowing into a snow-drift like a rabbit dodging the hounds, watched the two red-skins from his retreat. In the course of a minute or two he saw one of the red-skins rise to his feet, and continue on up the river. The other kicked some snow over their burden, drew his blanket closer about his head, and sat down to wait the return of his friend.

"Now's my time," mused Joe; "I'll slip up there and knock the stuffin' out of that Ingini and look into their bundle. If he'll offer no resistance I'll let him go; but if he does, I'll slap a bee in his bonnet in a jiffy."

He drew his pistol, and skulking along the bank approached the unsuspecting red-skin, who now stood erect with his blanket drawn close over his face to keep out the storm. The youth was within ten paces of the wily foe when the latter turned, opened his blanket and peered out.

Joe had risen to his feet and the two now stood face to face.

The Indian uttered an exclamation of surprise and felt for his tomahawk—Joe raised his weapon.

The "ping" of the pistol and a yell of savage agony were borne away on the wings of the passing storm.

Then from under the white snow, now stained with the crimson tide of life, came a woman's stifled cry of distress.

The wind sweeping down from the highlands of the north brought the excited voices of men upon its icy breath.

Vagabond Joe, standing alone in the midst of the cutting blast, saw half a score of human forms appear upon the bank, storm-weary, wild and hoary looking.

CHAPTER XII

CHRISTMAS IN AN INDIAN CAMP.

DR. CUDMORE and Ishtahaba felt certain that their plans for the recovery of Miss Manville would prove successful. So sure, indeed, was the former that he arranged a tent as comfortably as possible for the reception of his unwilling guest.

Slyly and Keen-Eyes, the Indians sent to watch Joe, were known to be as untiring and indefatigable as sleuth-hounds, and this left no doubt but that they would return with the maiden.

After arranging the tent for Miss Manville's accommodation, Cudmore visited the tent wherein Joe had seen the apparently lifeless form of Captain Howard lying. He went to the young officer's bedside, and drawing down the covering, felt his pulse.

"Oh, he'll be around by-and-by," the doctor said to himself, for he was really a physician of considerable experience; "but I tell you what, he got a serious jolt on the cranium."

"Sure there's been no fracture, doc," said one Jules Cupp, who appeared at the door of the tent.

"Yes; I think it was only a violent concussion of the brain, the effects of which will eventually be overcome. He's got a vigorous constitution, and can bear a great deal of physical pain. If the boys should come back soon with Miss Manville, I think the sound of her voice will be a potent remedy for this condition of his mind."

"They'll fetch her when they come, I'll bet," replied Cupp, for they're old, bloody Turks on follerin' a trail."

"Well, all we can do is to wait patiently their return; and for fear they don't come soon with the girl, I'll give the captain a stimulant of my own."

The doctor took a medicine case from his pocket, and filling out a prescription, administered the same to the young captain in a little brandy. This done, he carefully covered the patient, and then went out and joined his comrades.

As the hours went by, and the two spies did not put in their appearance, Ishtahaba began to entertain some fear of their having met with trouble. He knew there were, at least, some eight or ten white hunters—friends of Captain Howard—in the vicinity; and that they would remain in the neighborhood until they had learned something definite as to the fate of their friend. Into their hands the chief was afraid the two spies had fallen.

About noon several warriors were sent out in

search of the absent scouts; but returned at night without any news of them. This unexpected termination of affairs cast a shade of disappointment over the spirits of the party; nevertheless, Dr. Cudmore and his white friends determined to celebrate Christmas eve. They felt no fear of danger, for their force was sufficiently strong to repel any that the enemy might bring against them. As to Grace Manville, the doctor did not, for moment, believe she could escape him entirely; for men had been posted by the different ways leading toward the settlements, of which Fort Dodge was the nearest.

Cudmore and his white companions had, in anticipation of a grand carousal after the consummation of one of the blackest conspiracies upon record, procured a keg of brandy and brought it with them to camp. This was now opened, and the liquor sampled by Ishtahaba and his followers.

Dr. Cudmore had explained the meaning of Christmas to the red-skins, and painted, in glowing colors, the manner in which the pale-faces celebrated the occasion by the blazing yule-log, and in the foaming Wassail bowl. And in connection therewith, he suggested that they have a grand festival that night, which suggestion met with general approval by the red-skins. A deer was cut up and roasted, when the entire party repaired to the largest of the snow-huts in camp, and there indulged their appetites in roasting deer and brandy.

The effects of this debauch soon became manifest in the reeling, leering savages, and the wild, bacchanalian songs of the white men.

The interior of the hut was lit up by a couple of small fires—one at each end of the building; and around these fires the party was assembled—some standing, some reclining and some sitting—the frenzy of the inebriate burning in the eyes of the white men, and the foam of madmen sitting upon the lips of the red-skins.

And thus the revel went on, hour after hour. As a diversion, two savages got into a dispute over a knife, which ended in a deadly conflict between them. One of the savages was slain and the other mortally wounded. The dead man was hauled out of the snow-hut into the tent in which Captain Howard was confined, while the wounded one was placed in a separate tent.

And then the carnival went on.

Cudmore drank to excess. He became almost beastly drunk; and when no longer able to hold the attention of his companions by ribald songs and jests, he turned to Duke Belden and said:

"Duke, ole boy, give us a song—one of those singeing old songs of Odin, that jolly old Scandinavian god that used to make Christmas ring with his merry-making, and high-lonesomes that laid that affair at Bethlehem in the shade."

"I'm out of tune—hic—doctor," mumbled Duke; "you'll have to scuse me to-night—merry Christmas to you all—hic."

Silence was finally imposed upon the party by the liquor getting the best of most of them. Several sunk down in a drunken sleep, and a few remained awake the night through; but when morning dawned, all were astir, though feeling none the better of their night's debauch.

And up to this time, Slyly and Keen-Eyes had not put in their appearance at camp.

The wounded man lying in the tent was still unconscious.

The storm had ceased, the first time in many hours; but the wind shifting into the north-west began blowing wild and bitterly—whirling the dry snow in blinding clouds through the air.

The prolonged absence of the two scouts caused great uneasiness in camp. Fears that Vagabond Joe and Grace Manville had escaped were entertained by the whites.

Dr. Cudmore heading a party of ten struck out in search of the missing men. Other parties were sent out in different directions. Not over a dozen persons remained in camp; and these were suddenly surprised by the appearance of one of the scouts in camp. It was Slyly.

A comrade accosted him with the question:

"Where is Keen-Eyes? why does Slyly come back without either him or the maiden?"

Keen-Eyes watched by the side of the maiden down the river; and I have come for help to bring her to camp. The snow is deep, and the pale-face maiden is weak. Slyly and Keen-Eyes are worn out, for they have not slept, but traveled far upon the trail of the cunning Vagabond Joe.

"And where is Vagabond Joe?"

"Ask the wind creeping over the plain and woods, for Vagabond Joe is like the fox in the night," replied Slyly.

In a few moments six warriors were on their way down the river. Slyly did not accompany

them for he was nearly exhausted; but gave them such directions as would enable them to find Keen-Eyes.

In less than an hour the Indians came back carrying a burden upon a blanket, while Keen-Eyes trudged weary along behind them.

The Indians carried their inanimate bodies into one of the canvas tents, and carefully brushing the snow from the blankets and wraps, laid the motionless form upon the couch of skins already prepared for its reception.

At this juncture Cudmore came back to camp, cursing the storm, Vagabond Joe, and everybody else; but, when informed that Keen-Eyes and Slyly had returned with the maiden, his fury turned to joy, and pushing his way into the tent, he knelt by the still inanimate form and began removing the wraps from about the face and body.

Determined that she should not suffer with the cold, the Indians had wrapped the form of the maiden in three different blankets. Cudmore had removed two of these when he suddenly felt something warm trickling through his fingers; and holding up his hand, he saw it was stained with blood.

"My God!" he exclaimed excitedly, "she is wounded! dead!"

The doctor soon stripped off the remaining blanket, when the limp and lifeless form fell back upon his breast.

A cry of dismay burst from the lips of the spectators, for, instead of gazing upon the face of the white maiden, they looked upon that of Keen-Eyes, their own comrade!

From a bullet-hole in the temple the warm blood was still oozing.

CHAPTER XIII.

WAITING FOR JOE.

THE reader may consider the exposure to which many of my characters have been subjected as being beyond human endurance; but those fully acquainted with the freaks of the winter in the wild North-west will readily admit the possibility of all that I have stated.

As a general thing, those terrific snow-storms on the prairie seldom last over three days, ending with a fall of the mercury that makes the cold bitter and intense. But, at the time of which I write, the storm lasted many days, and is known as the great storm of the winter of 1856-7. It snowed, then blew; the weather, in the meantime, never growing so cold but that any one exposed could keep warm by physical exercise. The greatest danger to which people were liable, was of becoming bewildered in the storm; in which case, a lassitude of spirit and faltering courage led to despondency; drowsiness seized upon the mind, and numbness the body, when sleep is irresistible and death certain. As long, however, as the proper nourishments are taken, and the state of the mind kept under control, one can withstand the rigors of an intensely cold winter in the open air.

It is seldom severely cold upon the prairie when a heavy snow storm is raging; else man and beast could not live; and when the wind is blowing, it is the drifting snow and sleet driven into the face and eyes that make progress in the face of such a storm so disagreeable and difficult.

Singular as it may seem to some, there is no warmer habitation in the midst of a severe winter than a snow or ice-hut properly constructed. This fact has long been known to the hunters and trappers of the North-west, and to Arctic explorers, and taken advantage of whenever necessary, as was in the case of our hero, Vagabond Joe, when he provided Grace Manville with a cozy little snow-hut.

The maiden was greatly surprised at the warmth and comfort of the "Crystal Palace," as the redoubtable young builder had seen fit to call it; and when she found herself alone therein, she put aside all fears and doubts, and determined to pass the lonely hours before her the best she could.

She shook out the robes and blankets that Joe had been thoughtful enough to bring from the enemy's camp, folded them neatly, and arranged them upon the hand-sled—the only article of "furniture" in the "palace."

In the course of an hour or two, she put on her hood and shawl, and ventured out into the storm to drink in the fresh air and exercise her cramped limbs and body. When she returned she felt greatly invigorated; and, seating herself on the cushioned sled, began brooding over the events of the past few hours. That she was the victim of a villainous conspiracy she had not a doubt; yet, reposing the strongest faith in the ability of her boy-friend to deliver her from the toils of her enemies, her hope and courage never gave entirely way to despondency. Another

thing that lent additional strength to her young spirit, was the hope of soon meeting her betrothed, Captain Ralph Howard.

One thought begat another, and it finally occurred to her that the presence of Howard there in the Western wilds was rather a remarkable coincident in which the hand of Fate seemed to have something to do. But, what could it mean? why was he there? She pondered long over these questions, but found little relief in mental speculation.

Without the storm still raged. With every surge of the wind the stiff, icy tree-tops swayed and creaked ominously, and the great hollow linden that served as a chimney to the "Crystal Palace" chafed and chilled in the crook of the tree that supported it, until particles of dust were sifted out of the hollow into the fire. Now and then the wind rumbled mournfully down the great chimney.

The hours wore away, and when night began to settle around her, and the long howl of a wolf was heard afar off, Grace began to grow uneasy and restless. She wondered if she would have to spend the long, stormy night alone, and whether danger or trouble had befallen Joe.

Growing hungry she broiled some of the strips of venison prepared by Joe, and ate the sweet, juicy meat with a keen relish.

Darkness found Vagabond Joe still absent.

Grace replenished the fire that its light might dispel the shadows from her lonely retreat.

Suddenly it occurred to her that it was Christmas eve, and the thought brought tears to her eyes and a feeling of intense bitterness to her heart. And the more she thought of the fact the more despondent and heartsick she became. If Joe, however, would only return and bring her lover, she thought her sad, silent and lonely Christmas eve might be turned to one of infinite joy, despite the novel and dangerous surroundings. But, in this she was doomed to disappointment. The hours wore on and no friend came. She worried on between hope and fear until tired nature gave way and she fell asleep upon her couch of blankets and furs.

When she awoke it was daylight. The fire was nearly out; however, she managed to rekindle it into a cheery blaze, and then piled on considerable fuel, for she had become cold.

While the fire was blazing so cheerfully, and diffusing its warmth through the "palace," Grace broiled some venison for breakfast. The fat dripping from the cooking meat fed the already spirited flames, causing them to leap higher and higher and go roaring up the hollow tree serving as a chimney. At first Grace thought nothing of this, but it suddenly occurred to her mind that Vagabond Joe had cautioned her about that very thing—against letting the flames get into the tree whose hollow was lined with rotten wood and dust dry as powder. She brought in a handful of snow and threw it in the fire to subdue the flame; then she sat down and quietly ate her meal.

She was suddenly startled by a loud, roaring sound like that of flames; and a horrible fear seized upon her heart at the same instant, for she knew at once the cause of the noise. The inside of the tree was on fire!

"My heavens! what shall I do?" the maiden cried, in an agony of fear.

She started up as if to flee; but quickly recovering her presence of mind, she put out the fire upon the ground by covering with snow. But it was too late to be of avail. The flames were far up the hollow, roaring and hissing like a furnace, while millions of sparks showered down at her feet.

The maiden saw that she had committed a fatal blunder in allowing the fire to blaze up as it had; but it could not be remedied now; and, pale and trembling, she sat motionless as a statue listening to the roaring of the flames and waiting the final result, whatever that might be. Nor had she long to wait, for suddenly there came a loud, crashing, crackling noise outside. The tree had burned in two, and the top had fallen; and scarcely had it reached the earth ere the trunk snapped with a sharp report near the ground and fell, carrying the entire southern wall of the snow-hut with it.

A cry of affright burst from Grace Manville's lips, and she started back as she saw the end of her retreat go down, for she expected the whole structure to fall. In this, however, she was happily disappointed. The walls had been so firmly knitted together by the cold that none, save that carried down under the weight of the tree, fell. And, fortunately for her, it was the end protected from the wind and storm. She could now see out into the woods beyond where

the fallen tree lay, steaming and smoking in its bed of snow. She could see the tall trees and their naked, bristling tops twisting and writhing in the wind; and hear the roar of the storm as it beat through the woods and sky in merciless fury.

Suddenly the wind broke through the crystal palace, dashing up a cloud of snow in the girl's face and throwing her almost prostrate upon the earth.

Quickly rising to her feet she turned to inquire the cause of this freak of the blast, when, to her horror, she saw the blanket withdrawn from the door, and two savages bending over and peering in upon her.

This sight was more than her already worn strength could withstand, and with a cry she sank in a swoon to the earth.

The savages were the scouts, Keen-Eyes and Slyly, who had been attracted by the burning tree, as they were returning from their fruitless pursuit of Vagabond Joe.

With a shout of savage triumph, they sprung inside the snow-hut, and at once took possession of the unconscious girl. They wrapped her slender form in three different blankets; and then, without further delay, they lifted her in their arms and hurried away. They soon found that they had more on their hands than they would be able to get along with. Already wearied with a long tramp after Vagabond Joe, they found that the form of the unconscious girl momentarily grew heavier. Still, with that dogged patience so characteristic of the savage, they labored on through snow and storm.

The next thing of which Grace Manville was conscious, after seeing the Indians, was of a form bending over her and speaking in a low, familiar voice; while fine particles of snow fell in her face. She hastily recalled her scattered senses, and opening her lovely eyes, looked up into the handsome, boyish face of Vagabond Joe, and upon a dozen bearded, storm-laden men that stood around her.

"Is she dead, Joe?" asked one of the storm-spirits.

"Not by a long shot, Neutral Bill," replied Joe; "say, Miss Graceful, are you scart out of your wits? Look here, we're all friends ready to die for you, Graceful."

Recovering full possession of her mind, Grace sprang quickly to her feet and gazed around her.

She saw that she was out in the storm, and, horrors! at her very feet lay the lifeless form of one of her late captors, around whom the snow was weaving a winding-sheet.

She turned from the revolting sight and fixed her eyes upon Joe, their glorious light telling what her tongue refused to utter.

"We come just in time, Miss Graceful," Joe said, as if he comprehended the meaning of her looks; "it's been a good while since we parted; but I done the best I could to git back to you. These men are all our friends, and the friends of Captain Howard. They'll take care of you now, Graceful; so you go with them. I want to stay here and beat that other Injin if he comes back here with help, as I predict he will."

The hunters, under Neutral Bill, received Miss Manville into their care, and at once struck for the woods, where the storm was less furious, agreeing to wait for Vagabond Joe at a designated point.

Joe at once wrapped the body of the fallen Indian in the blankets so recently taken from about the form of Grace Manville. He carefully covered every portion of the body and then tucked the edges and corners of the blanket in and under, so that the covering could not come off. This done, he threw the Indian's dirty red blanket over his own head and shoulders, and then sat down to wait events.

The snow blowing from the plain drifted in along the river, and in ten minutes every track was filled, and all vestige of the late enactment completely obliterated, so far as the eye could penetrate.

Six Indians from Ishtahaba's camp approaching from up the river, found Keen-Eyes, as they supposed, and the maiden half buried in the snow, for Slyly had told them where he had left his companion and the maiden.

Without the least ceremony the savages spread out a blanket, laid the motionless form upon it, and then with a savage at each corner and one at the side, the hastily improvised litter was lifted and borne away, Keen-Eyes following at a safe distance behind.

The storm prevented conversation and aided the daring boy in every particular of his bold and desperate game. He watched the six warriors between the borders of his close-drawn blanket, a smile of grim delight playing over his face as he did so.

"Great mallysanders!" he mused, "won't they scotch when they find out the facts?"

Joe allowed the savages to enter the encampment more than twenty rods ahead of himself, so that when he came up the center of attraction was around the tent in which the supposed captive was placed; and taking advantage of this diversion the adventurous youth slipped into the tent where Captain Howard was confined.

The captain heard him coming, and supposing he was an Indian, feigned unconsciousness until he heard the low, familiar voice of Joe saying:

"Cap, oh, Cap, are you hurt? dead? or asleep?"

The captain opened his eyes and gazed up into the boy's face.

"It's me, Cap, Vagabond Joe," the youth continued.

"Ay! I recognize that voice," replied the captain, feebly; "how come you here, Joe?"

"I waltzed here in this dirty rag of a blanket, captain," he responded.

"Where have you been, Joe? and where is she—that girl?"

"Safe, captain, in the hands of your friends. I tell you, Cap, she's a stavin' purty gal!"

"Thank God!" murmured the captain; "oh that I could go to her!"

"Are you seriously hurt, Cap?"

"Not so badly hurt, as I am weak from the loss of blood. Tell Miss Manville that I should like to see her, for I am now satisfied that she is more sinned against than sinning. But the Lord only knows what my enemies will do with me. I am completely at their mercy."

"Keep a stiff upper lip, captain, and I'll get you out of this pestilence, or bu'st a trace. But I'll have to be goin', Cap, for I'm supposed to be an Injin under this blanket, and they'll find there's been some shenanigan played on them when they find a dead Injin rolled up in a blanket where the red fools s'posed Miss Graceful was. I'll watch out for you, cap'n, and don't you forgit it. I'm going to put a bee in Doc Cudmore's bonnet, now mind. I'm on the war-path big as old Guldry. They wouldn't let me stay in school at the settlement—detarminoed I should be a young savage, and so I'm goin' to put in my best licks. This is an awful, awful storm, Cap; the likes old Neutral Bill said war never known in the nor'west. But if it don't git any colder, I can worry through as easy as a ring-necked snake in the grass. Yes, Miss Graceful Mansville is well and safe, and she sent me to inquire after you. Lor' mollyhorns! but if she isn't an angel of a gal, I don't know what an angel is. But I'd better be off, Cap, for fear of danger. Good-by. Look out for breakers, and—don't you forgit it."

As the lad turned to leave, his eyes fell upon some cooking utensils and supplies that had belonged to his friends, and suggested that he appropriate some of them for the needs of his comrades in the woods. So he put some ground coffee in his pocket, and taking a small coffee-pot, a drinking-cup and frying-pan, he concealed them under his blanket, and stole out into the storm and away into the woods, the drifting snow filling his tracks almost as fast as they were made.

The young borderman made his way back to where he had left his elk-team, and unfastening them, he sprung into his "jumper," and drove away toward the south-west. In half an hour he arrived at the point designated for his meeting with Neutral Bill's party. He found his friends busy as beavers erecting a snow-house, under the supervision of Old Bill. Grace Manville sat near, sheltered from the storm, watching them as they worked, and feeling more buoyant in spirit than she had felt for some time.

The maiden was greatly pleased when she saw Joe drive up. She had conceived a regard for the little vagabond strong as sisterly love; and as soon as he had hitched his team, she called him to where she sat, and addressed him thus:

"Joe, I am very, very glad to see you back, alive and unharmed. I was so 'fraid you would be detected in your disguise. You are a brave boy, Joe, but a little rash, sometimes."

"I'll admit that, Miss Graceful; but a feller's got to be rash as a mad bull when he deals with red-skins. I kind o' hate to go killin' and slashin' around like a young hurricane of a pirate, but when it's necessary, I never hesitate to put a bee in a red-skin's bonnet, and—don't you forgit it?"

"I'll not, Joe," responded Grace; "but what of Captain Howard? did you see him?"

"Yes, Miss Graceful; he's lying in that tent, what I helped you out of, with an awful leak in his head. But, then, he'll git along if he don't catch cold, or the devils don't kill him. I prom-

ised to get him out of his trouble, and I'm going to do it."

In a few minutes more the hunters had completed their snow-house, which had been made large enough to accommodate the whole party. All but two, left on guard, moved into the domicile, when a fire was lighted. A hollow tree open at the bottom was inclosed in the structure to be used as a chimney, the same as Vagabond Joe had done in erecting "Crystal Palace."

When Grace saw Old Bill kindling a fire at the foot of the tree, a shudder ran through her form, for her thoughts reverted to the moments of agony that she had passed through in her adventure with the panther, the fall of the burning tree, and her capture by the savages.

With the cooking utensils procured by Vagabond Joe, a sumptuous meal of venison was prepared, Grace kindly assisting in the labor.

Vagabond Joe unharnessed his elks and fed them some of the provender he had brought along for them; then he cut arm-loads of green brush and placed it where the animals could feed upon the buds and bark—the only food of the wild deer and elk during the long winter.

Night again closed over the woods, and the coming of the shadows was attended with many misgivings as to what was in waiting for the little band of hunters, and their fair charge. Guards were stationed upon all sides; and every precaution taken that was necessary to guard against a surprise by the enemy.

Everything within the power of the hunters was done to increase the safety and comfort of Miss Manville. There was no sacrifice that any of them felt was too great to be made in her behalf; and so each one took especial pleasure in the mental resolution to die in her defense, if need be.

Vagabond Joe was, by the consent and urgent request of all, relieved from further duty that night; for it was quite evident to his friends that he had overtaxed nature's physical powers by days of constant activity and dangers that had found no relief in the balm of sleep or quiet rest.

Joe readily acquiesced in their wish, and rolling himself in a blanket he laid down upon the ground. He soon fell asleep and slept soundly. The men by the fire talked in low tones, and dozed upon their seats.

The guards outside paced their beats with unrelaxing vigilance.

About midnight the wind went down, the storm slackened, and the clouds became broken and scattered. In another hour the sky was clear and twinkling with its myriads of stars.

The moon was up in the zenith, and her light and the whiteness of the snow, made it almost light as day around the camp.

Clear as it had become in so short a time, the air was comparatively warm, and Neutral Bill had little hopes in this sudden breaking away of the clouds, and the state of the weather in general, being a permanent end of the storm.

"It's a bad sign, boys," he remarked; "you never see a storm clear off so sudden in the night, but it begins ag'in before the morrow's light. Bear this in mind."

The bark and howl of wolves could be heard afar off in continual jowering; and now and then the guards caught sight of a dark, skulking form plunging through the snow near camp.

As the night advanced the cries of these cowardly scavengers of wood and plain burst forth far down the river. It seemed as though they were massing their forces in that direction preparatory to a grand movement, and that their cries were the signal for their neighbors to fall into the ranks.

The guards outside stopped their beat and listened. The unearthly sound seemed to be approaching, for it not only grew louder but clearer. Down from the northern prairie, up from the southern wood, and along the silent river the terrible howl and cry of the beasts rolled like the seething roar of an advancing tornado. The very air seemed to quiver with the terrible sounds vibrating through it.

Neutral Bill shook his head dubiously.

"Pandymonium has let loose her evil spirits," he said, gravely.

"They're comin'—a million strong," grumbled Bildad Meeks, the president of the school board.

"I don't understand it," said Old Bill; "they can't all be arter a deer, or an Injin, or a white man. Thar must be something far more enticing to sick a scad of the hungry critters."

"Great mollyhorns!" exclaimed a voice behind them, and turning they saw that Vagabond Joe was at their side, listening to the wild tumult of beastly voices.

"What do you think of that, Vagabond?" asked Old Bill, turning to the youth.

"Think it's a lively batch of gallopaders—must be a thousand or two of the satanic critters," replied Joe.

"Well, their howls and yelps commingle so like the hum of bees' wings that I can't tell exactly whether there's a dozen or a million."

"I hope they won't stop 'round here," put in Bildad Meeks.

"If they'll keep on up the river they can get all the red-skin bones they want to pick," was Joe's opinion; "but then the captain's there, and a wolf won't eat a red-skin when it can git anything better—Jeminty! isn't that a lively racket, though?"

Several minutes passed by, and in the meantime, the frightful noise of the wolves drew nearer and nearer. At length it seemed to pause directly north of camp, near the river, and change into a snarling, gibbering murmur, high above which the wild, terrified and heart-rending scream of a woman pierced through the wintry night.

CHAPTER XIV.

A WOMAN'S CRY.

"My great Redeemer!" exclaimed Vagabond Joe, excitedly, "didn't you hear that scream?"

"I heard sunthin'," Vagabond, sure as death," answered Old Bill; "and it sounded very much like a wail of human fear—ah! there it goes again!"

"Yes, and so let's to the rescue, boys—everybody!" shouted Vagabond Joe, running into the snow-hut for his rifle. "Up, men! there's work for us—somebody's in danger!"

In a moment every man was upon his feet, and with rifle in hand, plunged away through the snow toward the river on whose banks the wolfish hordes held carnival. They soon came in sight of a sea of surging, shaggy forms gathered around something over which they were trembling, rolling and leaping like the black sediments of a boiling caldron—a living whirlpool, twisting, writhing and seething.

There must have been a hundred wolves in the pack—grim and gaunt with hunger; and it was with no little care that our friends approached them. The hunters could see them surging to and fro, fighting and snarling, though they could not see the object of their desperate fury. Now and then, however, they could see a wolf leap straight into the air as if trying to pluck something from the bushes overhead.

"By mallysanders!" said Joe, "there's somebody in the bushes they're tryin' to catch. They've treed somethin', be it man, woman or child."

"Seems to be the case," affirmed Old Bill.

Suddenly a huge wolf, more active than his fellows, bounded upward as if shot from a spring-trap. A scream of human terror—that same woman's shrieks—rang out, distinct and startling. The wolves closed in from each side, leaping into the air like two rebounding waves coming together and falling back upon themselves.

"It's clear enough to me now, boys," said Joe; "there's a woman in the bushes there just above them wolves! Come, let's charge them."

They advanced upon the animals, and when a few paces closer a dark object, clinging to a slender sapling that was bending low under the weight, was lifted from against the dark background of shaggy forms and outlined against the white snow beyond. They could see that it was a human form that had either been bound to the sapling, or else was clinging there in a desperate effort to escape the jaws of the hungry pack below. The form appeared to be wrapped in a blanket, one corner of which hung quite low. This the animals could reach, and seizing it in their mad leaps, caused the bush to sway up and down, gradually settling lower and lower.

At a signal from Old Bill the hunters fired upon the pack with their rifles, then drawing their revolvers, charged upon the animals firing and yelling as they went. With a howl of dismay that seemed rife with almost human disappointment, the wolves were forced to give way; and as they scattered into the woods the hunters hurried forward to find the person clinging to the sapling had been securely bound there.

The body was wrapped in a blanket, and taking hold of the pendent corner, already torn to shreds by the wolves' sharp teeth, the bush was bent low enough to release the unknown's slight form, which was received in the arms of two of the men.

"Ah!" exclaimed one of the latter, "it must be a child, judging by the weight."

"It wouldn't 'a' made a bite apiece for all that horde of wolves," replied the other.

"Who is it, any way?" asked Vagabond Joe, for the face of the unknown was covered with the blanket enveloping the slight form.

As if in answer to the lad's question, the stranger stirred in the arms of the two men, and an excited voice cried out from the folds of the blanket:

"Save me! oh, save me from them horrible wolves!"

It was rather a childish voice.

"My great Lord!" cried Vagabond Joe, "that is her voice! her voice! Oh, what has befallen the settlement?"

"What ails you, Joe? are you going crazy?" asked Old Bill.

"No, no; hurry to the hut with her! She may be freezin'. I see now that some inhuman devils have tied her there to die. Hurry on, boys, for them tarnation wolves are comin' back!"

The two men, with the stranger in their arms, turned and moved rapidly toward camp, followed by their companions, and closely pressed by the returning wolves that seemed determined upon not being cheated out of the delicate morsel that had so long tempted their hungry maws.

When near the snow-house, Vagabond Joe ran on ahead to arrange a couch for the woman, his boyish face wearing a look of mingled fear and joy. As he approached the door of the structure he was startled by the discovery that his sleigh and elks were gone. He darted into the hut, and, glancing around, uttered a cry of horror. It was empty! Grace Manville was gone.

"Oh, my Lord, friends!" he cried, running back to the door, "we have committed an awful, awful blunder!" Miss Graceful and my elks and sleigh are all gone! The red devils have been here while we were away!"

An exclamation that was fraught with the bitterest surprise and disappointment burst from the lips of the party, and for a moment it seemed as though the diversion this startling news created would enable the wolves to steal a march upon them. But Vagabond Joe was equal to any emergency, and at once rallied the little band from their momentary stupor.

"Men!" the young borderman exclaimed, "we musn't let them wolves come closer. See! they are crowdin' right up towards us!"

The hunters turned and opened fire upon the snarling horde; while the two men, with the unknown female, entered the hut and deposited their burden upon a couch—the one so lately occupied by poor, persecuted Grace Manville. Then they hastened outside to assist their friends in driving away the wolves.

Not until the wild, famishing beasts had been half slain did the survivors leave the field to their human foes.

When the battle with the wolves had been won, Vagabond Joe turned, and hastening inside the hut, began removing the blankets and wraps from about the form and face of her whom they had so recently rescued. As the last one was removed, and the eyes of the girl, for girl she was, and those of our hero met, a light of recognition flashed in those of each, and a cry of joy burst from their lips.

CHAPTER XV.

THE WEAVERS AT WORK.

ISAIAH NEWBOLD, land-agent and speculator, sat in his office in Fort Dodge on the day after Christmas, busily engaged in writing. Before him lay an open letter bearing date of a year previous, and signed, "Your Friend, Henry Sampson."

To this letter, while writing, Mr. Newbold had occasion to refer nearly every word he penned; and sometimes, when he wished to write a word, he would look through the letter for a similar word. In fact, the land-agent acted, for all the world, as though he were trying to imitate Henry Sampson's style of penmanship—a very peculiar hand indeed.

That his motive in doing this was not altogether of the most honorable kind, was evident from the uneasiness that he betrayed while at work. If a footprint passed the door, he would conceal Sampson's letter and cover his own work with a blank warranty deed. If the author of his uneasiness called, the agent would appear to be busy on this paper; but if he passed on, his copying was resumed.

Presently there came a soft rap upon the door, which startled the land-agent with a smile of recognition, and rising, he advanced and opened the door, admitting a gentleman and lady.

It was Uncle Jerry Grimes and his niece, Miss Irene Lamar.

The land-agent greeted them with a hearty, good welcome, and at once placed chairs for them before the cheerful fire burning on the hearth.

"I am surprised, Uncle Jerry," Newbold said, "to see you and Miss Lamar out such a blustery day as this."

"It's a very disagreeable day," answered Uncle Jerry, "but then I couldn't resist the temptation to come over and see you—"

"And I couldn't resist the temptation to come along for a sleigh-ride," laughed Irene, with a witching toss of the head.

"Well, it seems as though it never will quit storming," remarked Newbold, replenishing the fire from the pile of wood in the corner. "This storm is the worst that has ever occurred in the history of the North-west, they tell me."

"Very true, Mr. Newbold; I've seen nearly a score of winters here, and this storm beats them all. It's true, I've seen it colder, but never so long and disagreeable. The cold weather will follow, rest assured of that. Irene, did your hand most freeze? I see you working your fingers as though they were stiff."

"They got a little cold, uncle, and tingle some now," the maiden replied, her face slightly flushed.

"Well, Uncle Jerry, what's the best word from Glendale?" asked Newbold.

"Rather good, Mr. Newbold; I received a letter from Henry Sampson this morning."

"Indeed! from Henry Sampson? Well, I supposed he was dead until recently. What has he to say to you, uncle?"

"Here's the letter; read it for yourself," and he passed the paper to Newbold, who read aloud:

"CLAYTON, TENN., Nov. 12, 1856.

JERRY GRIMES, Esq.

"MY DEAR SIR: I wrote you some time since that I had no hope of ever finding your sisters, Margery and Naomi, or any trace of them. Since then, however, I have got upon the track of Margery and her family, and think I am in a fair way of finding them. It appears that she married a man named Coville, who died soon after their marriage. In the course of a couple of years she married again, this time, a man named Conrille, and by occupation an Indian trader. It is ascertained that they lived in Independence, Missouri, awhile; and while there, a son was born to them. They left Independence for Iowa, to engage in the fur-trade, and since that time nothing definite has been heard of them. I believe, however, that they are still living somewhere in your State; and if so, I am determined to find them."

"I have written to my old friend, Newbold, now of your village, to work the matter up in the North-west. You can place implicit confidence in anything he may do for you."

"I hope Irene is happy in her new home; and that you are enjoying a happier life in the sunshine of her angelic presence, for Irene is truly a noble girl."

"Hoping that the lost may soon be found, and that I may hear from you occasionally, I remain,

"Very truly yours,

HENRY SAMPSON."

"Uncle Jerry," said Newbold, when he had concluded the letter, "allow me to congratulate you upon your success in the search for your friends. And I am happy to add, that, in connection with this letter, I have some good news for you, also. I received Sampson's letter mentioned in yours, this morning;" and reaching up he took a letter from his secretary, and unfolding it, read as follows:

"CLAYTON, TENN., Nov. 11, 1856.

"MY DEAR NEWBOLD:—It has been a long time since I heard from you in your new home and business in the West. I sincerely hope the aborigines have never had the pleasure of fingering your glossy locks, and that you are realizing the great dream of your life, and are getting rich. Since I last wrote you, I have been on the move, as I usually am; and I am happy to say, Isaiah, that I have at last struck the trail of another of Uncle Jerry's sisters. You know we were thrown off the track by the disappearance of Margery, after the death of her first husband, John Coville; but I am now in possession of facts, and from good authority, too, that Mrs. Coville married the second time, and to a man named Conrille. He was a fur-trader, and with his wife he went to Independence, Missouri, and from there he went into Iowa, where all traces of him have been lost. It is quite certain, however, that he pushed into the vicinity of some military post. As Fort Des Moines and Fort Dodge are the only two posts in Western Iowa, Conrille must have stopped near one or the other. And now, Isaiah, I am going to place these facts in your hands, and I want you to work them out and receive the reward. I have a big case to work up in the South, else I should assist you in hunting up Conrille. Leave no stone unturned in your search, Isaiah, and I assure you that you will be amply rewarded should you be successful."

"I shall write Uncle Jerry to-morrow, and let him know that I have given Margery's case into your hands."

"Hoping to hear from you soon, and of your success, I remain, my dear sir,

"Yours, very truly,

HENRY SAMPSON."

"Good! good!" exclaimed Uncle Jerry, rubbing his hands in an ecstasy of delight.

"I believe, Mr. Grimes," said Newbold, "that I will have no trouble in finding you another heir."

"Indeed?"

"I believe Margery's boy is here, in this very settlement."

"You are jesting, Mr. Newbold," exclaimed Uncle Jerry.

"No, I am not; and I will tell you why: two years ago I located in Fort Des Moines in the land business; and while there I found it necessary to employ an errand-boy, and advertised for one. In a few days a bright, intelligent lad of about sixteen years called in answer to my advertisement. I asked for his recommendations, but he replied that he possessed none save his face—that his countenance was all he had to recommend him, for he informed me that he had no relative living that he knew of. He stated that his father had been a fur-trader, and that both his parents had died when he was too young to feel the loss of them. He said he had been raised by an old settler named Kay. He possessed some education—he could read and write, and seemed unusually bright and intelligent for one of his years and opportunities. I was favorably impressed with the lad's fine, manly and honest appearance and employed him; and so well did he fill his position that to this day *Mave Conrille is in my employ!*"

An exclamation of surprise burst from the lips of both Uncle Jerry and Irene.

"My great mercy!" shouted the old man. "I am surprised that I ever became such a heartless being as to forget my dearest relatives—to lose sight of my sisters, and think no more of them until I woke from my dream of selfish seclusion with the keenest remorse prickling my conscience. Poor girls! all dead. What a cruel wretch I have been. Oh, that I could live this life over! Well, I hope it may turn out that Mave is my nephew, for I have always liked him. He is a bright lad."

"I sent Mr. Carew to the Des Moines settlement this morning," said agent Newbold, "to see the Kay family that raised Mave, and obtain all information possible concerning the lad's parentage. Though, Uncle Jerry, there is not a doubt in my mind but that he is your sister Margery's child."

"Amen!" shouted the old man, clapping his hands joyfully; while Irene's eyes filled with tears of happiness.

"I will know certain, inside of a week," continued the land-agent, "if the storm does not delay Carew, and he is successful in finding Germshom Kay."

"Where is Mave now?" asked Uncle Jerry.

"Gone to school like a good boy," answered Newbold. "He is a very industrious and studious lad; and I predict a brilliant future for him, even if he is the son of a fur-trader."

"Does he know anything of his parentage?"

"Nothing at all."

"Have you mentioned this matter to him?"

"No; I thought I would make *sure* of his parentage before I said anything to him, that he might not labor under the weight of an uncertainty."

"Send him over to Glendale, Mr. Newbold, on an errand of some kind, that I may become better acquainted with him—that I may see what he is before I make him heir to a fortune, in case he should prove to be sister Margery's child."

"I'll do so, Uncle Jerry—probably this evening," responded Newbold, "that is if I can induce him to quit his lessons."

"Tell him he *must* go—think of some word you want to send me, and insist on his going," insisted Uncle Jerry, rising and buttoning his coat; "and now, Irene," he continued, "if you are warmed, we'd better be off for Glendale. Come over, Mr. Newbold, and see us whenever you can make it convenient."

"Thank you, I will do so, Uncle Jerry," replied Newbold, rising and accompanying his callers to the door. "I will report to you as soon as Mr. Carew returns from Fort Des Moines."

"Good-evening, Mr. Newbold."

"Good-evening," replied Newbold, bowing politely to Irene.

The next minute the old gentleman and his handsome niece were in their sleigh, driving rapidly homeward; while Newbold, with a look of strange fear and uneasiness upon his face, closed the door and went back to his seat.

A few minutes later two men came out of the

Waukonza Hotel, and sauntering leisurely up the street, entered the land-office of Messrs. Newbold and Carew.

Both of them were strangers at Fort Dodge, representing themselves as land-buyers looking up a location. To Isaiah Newbold they seemed to be old acquaintances, for, after greeting them in a familiar way, he said:

"Boys, I am glad you called."

"Why so, Isaiah?" asked one of them.

"We're in a fair way to get our necks stretched by the Vigilance Committee."

The two men stared uneasily.

"Indeed!" said one of them, "some one about to fly the track?"

"No; but then you remember what I told you of the conversation that passed between Irene Lamar and myself at Glendale, Christmas eve?"

"Certainly."

"Well, it is known—every word of it—to Myrtle Gray."

"Heavens! you're jesting!"

"I am not; she is an expert in the language of signs; and while Old Wallack played and sung so sweetly, that brat of a girl sat reading every word that was being said by Irene and myself. She even followed me out and took the vial from the window-sill where I'd arranged to leave it."

"How did you learn all this, 'Saiah?'

"Irene just left here, and from her own lips, or rather her fingers, for Uncle Jerry was present, I learned, the whole story."

"Well, what's to be done?"

"One of two things: give up all, or else silence the tongue of Myrtle Gray."

"We hold a full hand, 'Saiah, and why stack the cards and give up the stakes when they are so nearly won?"

"Ah! why, indeed?" repeated the land-agent, a world of meaning in his looks and tone.

CHAPTER XVI.

OLD BILL'S COLD WEATHER.

THERE was to be a spelling-school one night at the little log school-house overlooking the Des Moines, and the youth of Fort Dodge were joyous with anticipation. The stormy weather was somewhat of a drawback to the spirit of the occasion, for parents were afraid to allow their children out in the night and storm. There was not room enough in the little school-house to accommodate old and young, else they would have gone with their children. As none of them lived over a mile from the school-house, there was really little danger, after all; and so all the children assembled at the school-house soon after dark.

Parents waited eagerly their return, and finally all, but one family, were relieved of their anxiety and uneasiness by the return of their children, only to be startled from their domestic joy by the midnight echoes bearing through the settlement the dreadful news that Myrtle Gray was lost in the night and storm. In a few minutes' time, men with lanterns and torches were out, moving here and there in every direction in search of the missing girl.

But morning dawned and no word of Myrtle came to the ears of the distressed parents. That she was lost there was not a doubt in a single mind. She had left the school-house with the other children, all of whom had found their way home without trouble. Myrtle's home was not as far from the school-house as that of some others, though it was a little to one side of the main thoroughfare of the village.

Several of Myrtle's school-mates had bid her good-by within a few rods of her home; and how she could miss the house in going so short a distance was a mystery.

It never occurred to the minds of any one that the maiden might have been kidnapped and spirited away by some of those vagabond Indians forever lurking around the settlement; but, impressed with the belief that she had missed her way in the storm and wandered into the woods, and been lost, search was kept up day and night until all hopes of ever finding her had died out of every breast.

But, all this time, Myrtle Gray was safe, though many weary miles from home. In the snow-house of the hunters—far up the Lizard—the pretty-faced maiden was an honored guest, watched over and protected by her boy-lover, the redoubtable Vagabond Joe. It was she whom the hunters had rescued from the jaws of the wolves on the river-bank where they found her, securely lashed to a sapling. It was her voice crying out for God's mercy and help that the young heart of Vagabond Joe had intuitively recognized through a responsive thrill.

When Myrtle had been carried to the hut, and

the youth had removed the wraps from about her form, and gazed down into her sweet face that was white with fear and wild with terror; he knew at once she, like Grace Manville, had been the victim of some foul plot—no doubt of the same villains who had abducted Grace.

As soon as she had been relieved of the heavy blankets in which she had been bundled, Myrtle rose to a sitting posture and gazed wildly around the snow-walled room, and then up into the handsome, assuring face of Vagabond Joe.

"Oh, Joe!" she exclaimed, as if half in doubt, "is this not a horrible dream? Where am I, Joe?"

"Right, slap here, Miss Myrtle, in the snow-house of us hunters and settlers. Just you git up and mosey to our fire, and warm yourself, for you must be nearly froze to death."

"Oh, no; I am not at all cold. I have been so terrified that I couldn't get cold. But, Joe, what became of my abductors? Did the wolves get them?"

"I hope so, Myrtle, though I don't know for certain."

"My great, inadorable mercy!" exclaimed Bildad Meeks, rushing headlong into the camp: "Myrtle Gray! what does this mean, child? Who war it what tied you in that bush? Speak out, child, that I may seek the wretches and destroy them, soul and body—ah!" and the old man ceased for want of breath.

"I know not who my enemies were," the girl replied. "I only know that two men seized me last night when returning from spelling-school, and carried me away. They were both white men, as I could see, in disguise. As soon as they were outside of the settlement, they placed me upon a hand-sledge and dragged me along all day and night through the storm—halting only now and then a few minutes to rest or eat a cold bite. They expressed great anxiety to reach Ishtahaba's encampment up the river somewhere; but the storm and deep snow were too great for their endurance; and when night again closed in they could scarcely drag their wearied feet along. To add to their peril a number of wolves gathered around us and began to bark and howl, oh! so dismally. My abductors became greatly alarmed. I could hear them talking, though they spoke in undertones. I heard them say they would be devoured if they continued to worry with me and the sledge."

"The demons!" hissed Bildad Meeks; "I'd like to git them claws onto 'em, and I'd not leave a speck of 'em!" and the old man clutched wildly at space.

"My heart froze with terror," continued Myrtle, "when I heard them making arrangements to desert me, and endeavor to escape the wolves while they were devouring me."

"Oh Lord!" groaned Meeks.
"I begged them to save me—to let me go free," Myrtle went on, "but they would not do this, and under pretense of saving me, they tied me in the tree, knowing full well, for I heard them say so, that the wolves would gnaw the bush down; but, while the beasts were thus engaged, they would have time to escape."

"The inhuman monsters!" exclaimed Old Bill; "I'd like to jot them down on my list of stiffs, and will if ever I git a squint along my gun-bar'l on 'em."

"Did you ever see the men before, Myrtle?" asked Joe.

"No; they were entire strangers to me, but—"

"By the lamentable fact! the Indians have got both the elk team and Grace Manville!" exclaimed Fred Manning, rushing into the snow-hut.

An exclamation of the deepest regret burst from every lip, for most all had hopes that Grace had not been captured, but merely stepped out. But now, all was dashed to earth, and a shadow of gloom settled over the little party's spirits.

"We may overtake the devils that sneaked in here and took Grace away while we war fightin' the wolves," suggested Bildad Meeks, springing to his feet.

"Yes, if we start in time," added Fred Manning.

"Go keerful, boys," cautioned Old Bill; "we don't want to commit another blunder and leave Myrtle unguarded, as we did poor Grace."

"No," said Vagabond Joe, "let's keep what we've got, and get all we can. Half of us ought to stay here and guard camp, while the others go in pursuit of Grace. I'm ready for work."

It was unanimously decided that Joe should remain in camp, inasmuch as he was, already, nearly exhausted. Four others were detailed to assist him in guarding Myrtle, when the others, led by Neutral Bill, set out upon the trail of Grace's captors, which led away directly toward Ishtahaba's encampment.

The Indians had taken the precautionary measures to conceal the real strength of their force by stepping into each other's tracks; and to Old Bill, who was fully posted in Indian cunning, this act was fraught with some meaning.

"Blast thar ornery picters," the old borderman said, contemptuously, "they must think that I'm a sardine. I reckon I know thar's been a dozen or two of them 'long here 'stead of one or two. I'm no sleepin' beauty to be catched in such a trap as that."

So saying, the old trapper left the trail, and keeping far from it, made his way toward the Indian camp in a roundabout way. They moved briskly on until the light of the enemies' campfires burst upon their view, reflected in dazzling brightness by the snow.

They hung around the camp for quite awhile, and in the course of an hour or so they saw a score of Indians enter the camp from the east.

"That," said Old Bill, "proves what I told you. If we'd a' follered that trail up, we'd a' been ambushed and taken in outer the cold. Great Moses! if we'd about a baker's dozen of men with iron vertebrae, we'd charge that camp. But, as we're only six, I reckon we'd better wait and watch. I'd like to tally a stiff or two to-night. I'm on the war-path now, bigger'n a Crusader that fit for the Holy Cross. You see, boys, it's as I told you it would be, growing darker; the clouds are bunchin' up again, and I'll miss my guess if it isn't stormin' away like fire and fury inside of an hour. If it does go to stormin' again, I'm goin' to do somethin' desperit afore I go back to camp, or bu'st the brichen. I can't leave here knowin' that glorious young woman's in the demons' hands. And then, there's Captain Howard; he must be got out of there, someway or other. Oh, I tell you, boys, we've got our hands chock full of business! Hunting deer's no-war with this kind of sport, though I'sure you it's not so dashed funny to Miss Manville and Cap. Howard."

"Well, what's to be done, Bill?" demanded Bildad, impatiently; "I'm gittin' cold standin' here."

"Oh, well, I reckon we'd better go back to the camp and take it cool," answered Bill, changing his mind.

"Cool, the dickens! we've been takin' it with the mercury ranging pretty low; and the way that rising wind yowls and rants above the forest, it doesn't promise any better soon."

"It don't, for a fact, Bildad; it beats all creation how this storm hangs on; but then, it's nothin' when a feller gits used to it."

"No, in course not, when he's frozen stiffer'n a poker, dast it!" snapped the president of the school-board, out of patience with the weather and their continued troubles.

Neutral Bill led the way back to camp, where their arrival without Grace Manville threw a cloud of disappointment over the spirit of Vagabond Joe. The trapper-boy had entertained strong hopes of her rescue; and he had been telling Myrtle what a noble, high-born lady his late protegee was, and describing her beauty of face and soul in such emphatic and glowing terms that Myrtle thought she must be a creature of some other sphere.

The spirits of the whole party had been considerably clouded by the capture of Grace and the unpromising state of the future. Bildad Meeks became morose and irritable—finding fault with everything—particularly the keen atmosphere that interfered with the comfort of his long, sharp nose; and the condition of the weather in general, which, along with the Indians, would cut short his supply of venison for the season.

Vagabond Joe could feel little sympathy for the old gentleman, since he had been so hard on him in that school affair the week previous; yet he maintained a very respectful attitude toward him. Old Bill, however, whose thoughts ran wild with his tongue, cut right and left without any regard as to where he struck. This was a habit acquired by most old bordermen through force of habit.

"Don't be growlin', president," he said, reprovingly, "about the Lord's doin's. This weather is intended on purpose to work out some earthly good, now mind."

"Yes; and the result, I'll bet will be that we'll be froze to death and murdered by the Ingins," replied the president.

"Bah! talk 'bout cold weather; this is just good and healthy," averred Bill, with a sly wink at Fred Manning. "Why, man, I see'd it so cold once that a big, roarin' blaze of a fire froze into a solid chunk, and a man's breath would fall to the ground as soon as it came from his lips, frozen into solid balls of ice."

"Oh, the dickens!" retorted Bildad, incredulously,

"you don't mean to tell me this for a fact?"

"I do, I'll swan I do, Mr. Meeks; it was that cold."

"And you see'd the fire freeze?"
"Yes, I was right thar, and took my hatchet and broke the frozen blaze all up into little chunks. 'Bout this time 'long come a pack of Ingins, and what do you suppose I done? Why, sir, I took them little bits of frozen fire and traded them to the Ingins for peltries. I made the tarnal goshawks believe the frozen fire war diamonds—frozemfirum diamonds, I called 'em, and they didn't know any better. Golconda! you'd ought to 'a' seen their barbarous eyes glitter as they fingered the jewels over and over; and danced and hollered till it seemed as though they war goin' to bu'st 'emselves. I almost wept to see their savage innocence cropin' out in such demonstrations of childish joy. If it hadn't been ag'inst an Ingin's honor to rue back in a trade, I'd give 'em back their peltries and axed their forgiveness."

"What a conscience you have," observed Bildad.

"Yes; it's the way with my folks—runs in the blood. But, arter the Ingins had gone through lookin' at their jewels, each one keerfully rolled his up in the very heart of the bundle which he carried at his back. This done, they all sat down to eat a bite before resumin' their journey; and the fust thing I knowned the smell of burnin' fabrics smote my nasal nose, and then I see'd smoke isschooin' from every Ingin's bundle. The next instant a little blaze of fire darted its red tongue outer the folds of each blanket. You see, president, the frozen blaze had thawed out, the grease and other combustibles in the blanket fed the flames, and in two seconds the top-sail of every red-skin was afire. By the New Jerusalem! if ever thar war a lively time, it war then and thar. You'd 'a' thought an eagle had lit on them reds' backs and war diggin' its pizen talons into their very braceboards. They war skittish, I proclaim to you. They didn't know the cause of that spontaneous combustion, and I did. Thar's whar I had the advantage; and so I laffed and laffed till I shook every stitch of clothes off of me. It's a fact, Mr. President."

"Oh, human depravity!" groaned Meeks, while the rest of the audience burst into a peal of laughter, that had much to do in dispelling the gloom from their spirits.

"But that's not the coldest spell I've see'd, Mr. Meeks," Old Bill added, when the laughing had subsided.

"The Lord forbid!" exclaimed Meeks.

"The Lord works his sovereign will, Mr. President," Bill went on; "but, what I was goin' to tell you war about the cold weather I experienced up in Russian America, nigh the north pole. The air war stiff it was so cold—so stiff you couldn't hardly crowd your way through it; it's a fact, Mr. Meeks. A party of Alaska Ingins and North Polers got into a fight, and they fit, and they fit till they killed each other all. I happened over the battle-field—arter the battle, of course—and what do you suppose? Why, sir, thar stood nighly every man, stiff and bolt-upright—deader'n last year's posies—all leaning on a red staff."

"A red staff! Holy horrors!"

"Yes, a red staff, president; but it was frozen blood. When an enemy rammed his lance into an enemy, the blood streamed out and froze in a stiff, curved stream before the wounded man could fall; and so thar he stood, leavin' on his own blood. Why, sir, their war-yoops and death-yells hung on their lips in solid form. Gracious Peter! it makes me shudder to think of it. It was offil cold, president; this is nothing to be compared with that spell."

"And you lived through it?" asked Meeks.

"Ain't I here?" replied Bill.

"Yes, yes; I'll admit you are; but I'm afraid that spell of cold weather affected your regard for the truth, if you ever possessed any."

Before Bill could reply, the report of a rifle stung through the night.

CHAPTER XVII.

CUDMORE'S HEAD RECEIVES A "JOLT."

The report of a rifle called those within the snow-hut to the outside in an instant; and upon inquiry it was found that a lurking enemy had been seen skulking near and fired upon by the guard.

Neutral Bill and Vagabond Joe, both apprehensive of danger, at once made arrangements to meet the foe should they make an assault upon camp.

The sky was, as Bill had predicted it would be, overcast with gray, fleecy clouds, and the

wind was roaring among the trees and sucking along the forest aisles—piling the snow in long ridges on the leeward side of trees, clumps of bushes, and the frail domicile of our friends.

The snow rendered objects of contrasting colors perceptible at quite a distance, and it was with a feeling of no little fear that they finally discovered a number of shadowy figures moving among the trees toward them.

Vagabond Joe being the best shot in the party, brought his rifle to bear upon one of the moving figures; and simultaneous with the crack of the rifle, the death-yell of a savage peeled out upon the night.

The next moment every figure had disappeared behind trees and snow-drifts; and it was fully an hour before another was seen, when Neutral Bill tried his skill as a marksman upon one of the crafty foes.

"That counts one stiff for me to-night," remarked the old borderman, as a groan came from the woods. "I'm thinkin' times are goin' to be better, boys; I think the red-skins'll make it lively as a hornet's nest for us."

And the old hunter spoke the truth; for it was not long until the Indians opened a fire upon our friends from behind their coverts. The whites, however, possessed the advantage of position and made good use of it. Their only fears were of a charge, in which event some—if not all—were sure to fall, even if they should at first succeed in repelling the foe.

Fortunately, however, the Indians withdrew, after keeping up an hour's sharp firing; and the coming of day finally relieved the hunters of their greatest fears. Still, their situation was precarious. The depth of the snow and the stormy weather would not permit of their striking out for the settlement with Myrtle Gray. Moreover, they shrank from the mere thought of leaving Grace Manville and Captain Howard in the hands of Ishtahaba's minions.

The state of the weather was unchanged. It was not snowing, yet it was cloudy, and the wind sweeping down from the highlands of the north filled the air with drifting particles. Along the northern extremity of the timber where, in fact, stood the hut of our friends and the camp of their enemy, the snow drifted in and piled up, in places ten feet deep.

During the night the Indian encampment had been nearly drifted under. The tent in which Captain Howard lay, slowly recovering from his wound, was the most exposed, and was, therefore, entirely covered. It was quite comfortable in this lodge, though pitchy dark; and it was only by the sound of voices outside that the captain knew daylight had dawned.

During the day the Indians dug a passage through the drift to the door of the prisoner's lodge, when Dr. Cudmore entered with some roasted venison and coffee.

"Captain," he said, "as your breakfast comes late, you must have all the better appetite to enjoy it."

"I have no appetite for food," replied Howard.

"Why not? I see you are convalescing very fast. About to-morrow I thought we would break camp and move westward."

"Cudmore, I have no desire to go further west, I assure you."

"I know you hav'n't, captain; but then I have," was the reply of the rascally doctor; "you have meddled too much in my affairs to be set at liberty until you are powerless to injure me. I warned you, Howard, long ago; but you wouldn't listen to me. To get rid of you I came west, and you seemed to have anticipated me by coming also. Now, sir, I shall endeavor to checkmate you; I have nursed you back to life for that purpose."

"Cudmore, I never imagined you were so great a villain," said Howard, calmly.

"There are many things of which you have never dreamed, captain."

After thus mocking Howard in his helplessness, the villain went out. The captain sat down and ate the venison and drank the coffee brought him; though he had little relish for the same.

All day he remained alone with his thoughts, which were anything but cheering companions; and had he been aware of the fact that Grace Manville was a captive in the enemy's camp, his mental suffering would have been far greater.

Toward the close of day one of Cudmore's men brought him some supper; and attended his wants with far more kindness than had been the doctor's wont.

When darkness set in the captain was provided with neither light nor food, and so he was doomed to pass another night in a cold, cheerless tent. Thoughts of escape never entered his

mind. He was too weak and feeble to make his way through the storm unaided, even had he been at liberty to do so.

Surrounded, as his tent was, by snow, he suffered little from the inclemency of the weather. He was provided with a couch and ample coverings. Physically, he suffered but little; but mentally, he was in great distress. The fate of his friends, and above all others, that of Grace Manville, haunted his brain with that eager, burning anxiety that makes time and life a burden.

Shortly after dark he threw himself upon his couch and conversed with his only companions—his thoughts; and while thus engaged, he was disturbed by a slight noise that proved a relief to his mind, rather than an additional fear. The sound at first appeared to be on his right; but on closer investigation he found it was in the rear of the tent. It was a soft, scratching noise, in which he imagined he could hear the respirations of some one laboring under difficulties; and when he finally heard something like the edge of a sharp knife sweep down the side of the canvas tent, he started to his feet and fixed his eyes upon the spot.

It was dark as pitch, and he was compelled to depend entirely upon his ears for the information so eagerly sought. By this means, however, he was soon enabled to discover that some one was entering his tent by stealth, and the question naturally came up in his mind: was it friend or enemy? If the former, he was, no doubt, coming to his assistance; if the latter, to assassinate him.

Another minute of horrible suspense ensued, when the captain heard a low voice say:

"Captain! Captain Howard, are you dead or alive?"

"Alive," said Howard, swallowing back the great lump in his throat.

"Good!" exclaimed the intruder. "I, capt'in, am Old Neutral Bill, come in here to git you out of yer predicament. How are you, capt'in, purty stout?"

"No, Bill, I am not," answered Howard.

"Wal, I'm monstorous sorry to hear it; but then this is the only excepted time for you to git outen this. Four of your friends are waitin' at the eend of the tunnel that I've been four hours in borin' under the snow-drift leading to your tent. If you can only make them, Cap., they've got a hand-sledge to take you a-flukin' when you git there. What say you?"

"I can try it, Bill, but how long is the tunnel under the snow?"

"Two or three hundred yards, at least. I had a deal of a time in makin' it, for the snow is so dry that the tunnel fills up in places. But I think it can be follerred by usin' a little head-work, as the goat said to the stone-fence. Do you think you'll try it, capt'in?"

"Of course I will."

"Then if you have a blanket arrange it hood-fashion over your head and shoulders to keep the snow out of neck and hair, and then go it on all fours. I'll foller behind and push whenever you're liable to give out—harkee! that's a stiff a-comin'!"

The sound of footsteps were heard approaching the door, and the next moment a man carrying a sputtering, wavering torch glided into the tent. Before the man had time to straighten up after entering the low door, a heavy bludgeon in the hands of Old Bill fell upon his head and he sunk to the earth without scarcely a moan.

A shudder of horror ran through Captain Howard's veins as the dull, crunching blow fell upon his ears, and the man went down like an ox.

Old Bill picked up the light and held it to the fallen man's face.

"By heavens! it's Doctor Cudmore!" exclaimed Howard in a loud whisper. "Did you kill him Bill?"

"Don't know, capt'n; I give him a tarnal heavy jolt on the head. I'm prepared to say that I've scored more'n one stiff with a lesser lick than that; though, if you say so, I'll heave chunk of lead through his carkass outen my revolver. What say you? heave or not?"

"But the report will bring other enemies upon us," said the captain; "don't shoot, Bill."

"Wal, jist as you say, capt'in; but let's be gittin' outen this."

Howard threw a blanket over his head and shoulders, and dropping upon his hands and knees crawled into the dark, cold passage from which Old Bill had so recently debouched. Old Bill dropped his torch and at once followed, close at the wounded man's heels.

To Howard it seemed an endless undertaking crowding his way through the deep, drifted snow, and ere he was aware of the distance he had come, he suddenly burst out of the drift

into the open air, and found himself in the midst of his old friends and companions, who had long and patiently been waiting the result of Bill's adventure in tunneling to and from the prison-tent.

Quickly placing the wounded man upon the hand-sledge, the party started back to camp.

It was a long and difficult journey, owing to the depth of the snow, the hills and ravines over which they were compelled to travel; but at length their perseverance was rewarded by reaching camp, where a bitter disappointment awaited Captain Howard. He had expected to meet his betrothed, Grace Manville, there; for no one had told him that she was a captive in the hands of Cudmore and Ishtahaba.

CHAPTER XVIII.

"WHISTLE AND I'LL COME TO THEE."

It was more than an hour before Dr. Cudmore recovered from the effect of the terrible blow administered by the strong arm of Neutral Bill. The first thing of which he became cognizant was of being in the dark, and when it occurred to him where he was, and the condition of affairs, he burst into a storm of fury. Of course, he believed Captain Howard had dealt the stumblin' blow, and at once resolved upon satisfaction; but when he found that the darkness afforded his enemy advantages over him, he desisted from his purpose, and going to the door shouted for some one to bring a light.

In a few moments a white friend appeared with a torch; and he was not a little surprised to see the doctor's face covered with blood and contorted with rage.

"Why, doc, what in the furies is the matter?" he exclaimed.

"Matter, the devil! I'm going to do murder, Carl—bloody murder! As I entered this tent an hour ago, my amiable guest struck me with a thunderbolt, or the next thing to it, and knocked me senseless. I reckon if I'd laid here a week you bacchanalians wouldn't'a' come to look after me; but now for vengeance! Captain Howard shall pay the penalty of that blow."

He turned and went back into the tent, drawing his revolver as he did so. Reaching the interior he held his torch above his head, but to his surprise its wavering light fell upon an empty lodge. Howard was gone. A hole in the side of the tent, and a tunnel in the snow-bank piled against it, told how he had escaped.

A volley of oaths burst from Cudmore's lips. He turned white and black by turns as he contemplated the situation. He went back into the large snow-house where Ishtahaba and his warriors were assembled, and to them made known the flight of the prisoner whose wounds all supposed were too dangerous for him to dare venture out of his tent.

Ishtahaba was startled by the news. He at once dispatched men in all directions in pursuit. He also sent some to explore the huge snow-drift wherein he thought the prisoner might be concealed. But, hours of searching in the woods, and delving in the drift, proved unsuccessful; and Captain Howard was given up as lost. And this loss seemed to cause Cudmore great uneasiness, and entering the presence of Ishtahaba, he said:

"Chief, matters are getting worse and worse instead of better; and I think, now, that the sooner I get away from here, the better it will be for me. If I remain another day and that captain should escape us, the wolves and the weather, I may lose the white maiden and my head in the bargain."

"Ishtahaba is not afraid of the pale-faces," said the chief. "It is in his heart to strike them a deadly blow and avenge the death of the good chief, Siminadotah, and his family, who were killed by the trader Henry Lot, and his boys."

"I believe we had better break camp to-morrow morning, chief," persisted Cudmore. "I shall not feel safe until I am beyond the Missouri river. If you are determined to avenge the murder of your aged chief and his family, strike the settlers on the upper lakes where their strength is feeble."

"The pale-face medicine man is a great brave; he has long wisdom, and Ishtahaba respects his counsel. We will start on our journey west with the coming of the new day."

"So be it," responded Cudmore; "the snow will make it impossible for any one to follow us. That elk team and sleigh will come into good use, for we can place the maiden in the vehicle and convey her across the plain well bundled from the storm. If we should run out of food, we can slay the elks and draw the sled by hand."

"The white medicine is wise. We will go."

The matter being thus settled, Cudmore

visited the tent wherein Grace Manville was confined under a strong guard.

He found the maiden lying upon her couch, to all appearance sleeping soundly; and without disturbing her he turned and went out. As he could do nothing further that night, he sought his own quarters and laid himself upon his lowly bed to rest.

The night passed quietly, and early the next morning all were astir. Breakfast was prepared and eaten; an ample supply of venison for the intended journey was packed. Cudmore took possession of Vagabond Joe's fine elk team, and harnessed them to the youth's "Yankee jumper." When all were ready to start, robes, blankets and furs were placed in the sleigh, and then Grace Manville—weeping in despair—was placed therein, and carefully and tenderly bundled up so that there was no probability of her suffering of cold.

The elks were driven by a line attached to each one's horns. Cudmore took charge of the team, and when it was announced that all were ready for departure, he drove away. It had been arranged by Ishtahaba for the sleigh to take the lead so that those following could walk in its track and trample out all evidence of its having passed along there.

The journey was heavy and laborious through the timber where the snow lay piled so deep, and so several hours were spent in plowing and wallowing along before the edge of the plain was reached.

Here a momentary halt was made by Cudmore and party, not only to rest, but to prepare themselves for a different stage in their journey and a far different state of weather.

The plain was covered with but a few inches of snow. The wind in its unrestrained fury had carried it away and piled it in hollows and in the timber.

The course of the party now lay across the plain toward the north-west, almost in the very teeth of the cutting blast. A stretch of ten miles was before them to the nearest timber; and it was with some misgivings that the band of marauders, at length, left the Lizard timber and entered the plain.

Cudmore, driving the elk team, and walking behind the sleigh, still kept the lead as though he were as familiar with the country as Ishtahaba himself.

On, with heads bent to the storm, the party pushed rapidly as possible, their blankets and wraps flapping in the wind about their heads, and the blinding sleet driving into their faces.

The elks were perfectly docile, and as obedient as trained horses. The storm was their own element, and they moved along as easily as though unfettered by the hand of man.

The Indians kept a close watch upon all sides, more through force of habitual precaution, than any fear of danger. Nothing, however, could have been seen a mile away, for the snow was still flying through the air in blinding clouds.

Night came on apace, and about dusk the party reached the timber for which they had been aiming, and halted for the night. The captured tents, which the Indians had been compelled to drag along, were at once pitched, and fires were then lighted. As there was not shelter sufficient for all, those without gathered in wood and lighted a great, roaring bonfire, around which they kept up a dire confusion, dancing, singing and yelling.

Grace Manville was provided with warm quarters and a soft couch; but she slept very little that night. The fate of Captain Howard was unknown to her, and having heard that he was a prisoner in Ishtahaba's camp, she was afraid that he had been foully dealt with, inasmuch as she could hear and see nothing of him in the party.

Early the following morning, the band was ready to renew its journey. Grace was placed in the sleigh and well bundled up, for they still had another day's journey across a wide, bleak prairie before them.

Dr. Cudmore still retained charge of the team, and when all was again ready to start, he took the lead. Owing to some mishap among the Indians, he got several rods the start of the party. But without waiting for them to come up, he pushed on through the timber, and debouched into the open plain. At this very instant a strange, quavering whistle came plainly to the doctor's ears from around a point of hazel bushes to the north.

The villain stopped the team, while the elks pricked up their ears as if in alarm.

Cudmore took both lines in his left hand, turned partially around, and with his right hand motioned to his friends to hurry up.

The next instant that strange whistle again smote his ears. The elks made a sudden lunge forward, as if with affright, jerking the lines from the doctor's hands. Before he could recover them the animals were sweeping over the prairie in the direction whence the sound had come, carrying the sleigh and the maiden with them.

Cudmore and his Indian allies started in swift pursuit, but they might as well have pursued the wild winds, for the elks swept like lightning along the margin of the plain, yet never breaking a long trot—the swiftest gait of the elk.

Grace Manville, startled by this sudden dash, threw aside her wraps and looked out. The sharp, cold wind dashed the flying snow into her face, and almost took her breath. A cry of horror burst from her lips when she saw the trees and clumps of bushes flying past her as if upon wings. Her brain grew dizzy, and she was forced to cover her eyes to shut out the blinding rush of the forest.

The elks dashed on nearly a quarter of a mile, and finally came to a halt, almost as suddenly as the had started.

A voice fell upon Grace's ears.

The elks uttered a strange, peculiar sound, that startled the maiden.

She uncovered her face and looked out.

A figure, wrapped in a blanket, stood at the head of the elks, talking and fondling around them in a familiar manner that seemed highly agreeable to the animals. He soon came around and approached the cutter. He let his blanket drop from about his head, when lo! the boyish face of Vagabond Joe was revealed to the astonished gaze of the unfortunate maiden.

"Yoop!" he exclaimed, his eyes flashing with triumph, and his heart throbbing with manly pride; "I told 'em I'd rescue you, Miss Graceful, Baalbec and Nineveh know my whistle."

"Oh, Joe!" cried Grace, starting up in an ecstasy of wild delight, "you dear, brave little fellow! Is it possible that you are the cause of all this?—that you have rescued me from Cudmore's power again? Oh, Joe! you are a noble, fearless young hero, I declare."

"Thank you, Miss Graceful," the youth proudly responded; "but, don't you forget that I've had a time of it. I see'd them start with you yesterday; and so I determined to follow and watch my chances."

"Have you been in the woods all night alone, Joe?" Grace asked.

"Yes, 'um; but that's nothin' when a feller's workin' in the cause of a pretty girl like you, Miss Graceful. You see, Baalbec and Nineveh—that's my elks' names—know my call as I'll bet you know a book; and I don't b'lieve there's Ingins enough outside of purgatory to hold 'em back when I give the call to come. Great mollyhorns! didn't they come a-flukin', though? Didn't they come a-sizzin', Miss Graceful?"

"They ran so swift that I dared not look out, Joe. In fact, I expected to be killed every moment, for all had occurred so suddenly that I could not tell what it meant."

"Well, now," the lad exclaimed, keeping his eyes turned in the direction of the enemy, "them red varmints are working up this way pretty friskily, so I reckon we'd better reel off."

So saying, Joe stepped into the sleigh and seated himself by the maiden's side.

By this time Dr. Cudmore and a number of his followers were within forty rods of the fugitives—shouting at the top of their voices for the youth and maiden to stop.

"Oh, yes, smut-faces!" Joe shouted back to them, "we'll stop, you miserable, p'izen gal-thieves, we'll stop—in course we will! and don't you forgit it. But, hold on, Graceful; I'm goin' to skeer 'em a little, for the fun of the thing."

He got out of the sleigh and resting his rifle across the corner of the vehicle, took deliberate aim at the advancing foe and fired.

Dr. Cudmore staggered and fell; but without one word as to the result of his shot, Vagabond Joe stepped back into his sleigh, and speaking to his elks went speeding away over the plain into the driving storm—from the view of Ishtahaba and his followers.

CHAPTER XIX. ANOTHER HEIR AT GLENDALE.

A GLOOM hung over the little village of Fort Dodge. The mysterious disappearance of Myrtle Gray had created a void in every heart there; for she was loved and admired by every one, both old and young.

A week had passed since her disappearance, and in this time not a single word had been heard of her. Some had suspected her abduction by vagabond Indians; but the weather had

been so stormy and severe that it was impossible to institute a search among the villages of the red-skins.

Mave Conrille carried the sad intelligence of the maiden's disappearance to Glendale. He went over there in compliance with the agreement entered into between Mr. Newbold and Uncle Jerry.

The latter was astounded by the news that Mave brought; while Irene seemed deeply affected by emotions of the deepest sorrow, and confessing a sister's love for the pretty and gentle-hearted little Myrtle.

Mave Conrille found Uncle Jerry somewhat indisposed, and the news of Myrtle's disappearance proved an additional shock to his feeble health that well-nigh prostrated him. He, like all others who had met Myrtle, naturally learned to love her. The radiance of her sweet young soul had reached the old man's heart; and this was strengthened by the maiden's kind warning of there being a conspiracy plotted against him. He had revolved that matter over and over in his mind a hundred times; and, although he could not form the faintest conception of whom the conspirators were, it preyed stronger upon his mind and health the more he thought of it.

Since he had heard of her disappearance, however, the old man had put his wits to work; and by some reason or other—intuition undoubtedly—her fate and the conspiracy of which she spoke seemed to have some connection. But, where could the conspiracy exist? As it could not possibly be in his own household, it must, of course, be in the settlement. But who were the conspirators? Among all his acquaintances in the village, he could fix suspicion upon no one.

But while Mave Conrille was still a visitor at Glendale, Uncle Jerry took Irene aside and held a private conversation with her.

"Irene," he said, "there is some mystery connected with Myrtle Gray's disappearance, which, in my mind, indirectly involves myself, some way or other."

"Why, Uncle Jerry, what makes you think so?" questioned Irene, betraying no little agitation, which the old man could construe into no other emotion than fear and surprise.

"I hate to tell you, Irene," he responded, "for I observe you're of a nervous temperament, and in consequence have kept the secret from you ever since Myrtle was down to visit us. But when I took her home Christmas morning, she said, when she got out of the sleigh in front of her father's house, 'Be careful, Uncle Jerry; there's a conspiracy on foot to murder you for your wealth.'"

A little cry burst from Irene's lips, and she turned deadly pale.

"At first I thought she was joking," Uncle Jerry continued; "it'd been just like the merry little sprite; but since she has disappeared, I'm inclined to think she was wanted out of the way."

"Oh, I do wonder if such can be true!" cried Irene.

"I'm afraid there's something not altogether right, Irene," the old man answered with a troubled look; "and if the mystery that hangs around Myrtle's absence is not revealed soon, I shall unload my heart of its burden, and tell you what I know and what I think."

Irene appeared greatly agitated by these remarks, and had the old man not been so blind in his regards for the fair girl, he might have seen the slumberous fire of a caged tigress burning in her eyes.

When their interview had ended, they repaired to the sitting-room where old Wallack was entertaining Mave Conrille with those soul-stirring negro melodies of which he was master. All listened awhile to the music, then conversed awhile, when Mave took his departure for home, promising to return soon.

That night a sleigh dashed up to Glendale and two men alighting therefrom, gave their team into the care of one of Uncle Jerry's ever ready servants, and entered the house.

These men were Messrs. Newbold and Carew, land-agents of Fort Dodge.

They were kindly received by Uncle Jerry and his niece, and after the compliments of the day had been given all round, Newbold said:

"Well, Uncle Jerry, we have come with good news for you."

"Ah! indeed? has Myrtle Gray been found, Mr. Newbold?" was the old man's first thought.

"No; but another of your sisters' children has" replied the land-agent.

"You don't tell me, Mr. Newbold! has it turned out as you expected?"

"Exactly," responded Newbold, "though it

is Naomi's child instead of Margery's. Henry Sampson got the names confounded some way or other."

"Thank the good Lord! Naomi's child—sister Naomi's boy," said Uncle Jerry, reflectively.

"Yes, my friend, Mr. Carew found the old settler who had raised Mave from a child; and among the relics of your sister's family they possessed this picture."

He took from his pocket a time-worn picture case, and opening it, handed it to Uncle Jerry.

A cry burst from the old man's lips as his eyes fell upon the face of the picture.

"Yes, yes!" he cried, his eyes filling with mist, "it is the face of my poor sister, true enough. Oh, Naomi! what a cruel, heartless brother I have been to you and Ruth and Margery!"

He kissed the picture, while scalding tears chased each other down his wrinkled face.

A few moments of silence ensued when the old man burst forth:

"You know not, gentlemen, what recollections—boyhood recollections—this face brings up. And they reproach me for the miserable life I have led as a recluse—refusing the love of my sisters and friends, when I might have been happy. But now they are gone—all gone. No, not all, either; thank God I have Irene and Mave to continue the remainder of life's journey with."

"Then you feel satisfied that Mave Conrille is your nephew, by the evidence produced, do you?" questioned Simon Carew.

"What more could I ask, Mr. Carew? Yes, I am satisfied; tell Mave to come here if it is his desire so to do, and make Glendale his future home. Dear me! if I could only find Margery now, or her children, I believe I could live and die happy."

"Then you are not entirely happy?" said Newbold.

"Not altogether, Mr. Newbold: somehow or other, it seems as though there is something wanting, or some one still absent. I don't know why I feel so, for it is one of those unaccountable things of life—a mystery of a sort of fungus growth—coming and going—no one knows why, nor where. But, be this as it may, there is a void in my heart that no earthly power can fill. At least it seems so."

A smile, slightly disdainful, passed over the face of Irene Lamar, while her eyes drooped and her cheeks colored as if wounded by the old man's remarks.

"Time changes the heart as well as the head, Uncle Jerry," said Newbold, philosophically; "and there is no telling what peace and happiness your two young relatives will bring to your declining years."

"I hope for everything in them. Upon them shall I center all my future happiness and earthly possessions."

Newbold and Irene exchanged glances, while their fingers played in silent conversation.

The two men took their departure in the course of an hour or two, Mr. Newbold promising to send Mave to his new-found friend and new home upon the morrow.

And when the morrow came, Mave Conrille, with all his earthly effects tied up in a small bundle, made his appearance at Glendale and entered upon a new life with the blessings of kind-hearted old Jerry Grimes.

CHAPTER XX.

RUNNING THE GANTLET.

VAGABOND JOE knew the speed of his elks, and keeping the high ridges where the snow was not deep, he soon left Ishtahaba and his followers far behind. He kept north until he had passed the point of timber, then turned and wound gradually around until headed toward the south with the storm upon their backs.

Grace Manville had kept her face covered—not only to shut out the storm, but to conceal the dizzy, dangerous rapidity with which she was carried over the plain; but when beyond all present danger, Joe slackened the speed of his faithful animals and addressed his companion thus:

"Now, Miss Graceful, we've got the wind on our backs, the red-skins out of reach, and so you can look out, if you want to."

Grace at once uncovered her face and glanced around with a look of great relief. Then she lifted her eyes to the face of her young rescuer, beaming with all the gratefulness of her woman's heart.

"Joe," she said, "I declare I scarcely know how to express myself to you for this kindness."

"Oh, gallinippers! if that's what's worryin' you, Graceful, don't think any more 'bout it," replied, Joe. "I know you feel thankful and

obliged, and all this, so that's enough for me. What do you think of the situation, eh?"

"I am so completely bewildered that I cannot answer that, Joe," the maiden replied, with a smile that denoted her embarrassment.

"You have been changin' about so rapidly, Miss Graceful, that I expect it has knocked the p'ints of your compass all topsy-turvy; but you'll soon git your bearings again. I'm goin' to be back to camp afore night, if Baalbec and Nineveh don't give out; and if they've had anything to eat since they were taken from me they'll go through all right."

"I hope so, Joe; for if I don't get out of this wintry storm and its surrounding dangers, I shall surely die."

"Oh, great mollysanders, Graceful! you don't want to say die now. If we find things all right when we git back to camp, our troubles will be over with."

"But what of Captain Howard, Joe?"

"I am pleased to inform you, Miss Graceful, that he's well as could be expected."

"Then he has been rescued?"

"Yes, ma'am."

A cry of joy burst from the maiden's lips.

"Oh, that I may be permitted to meet him soon!" she exclaimed. "I know there is something or somebody dreadfully wrong somewhere, or else I would never have been here. Dr. Cudmore's presence confirms this."

"He's an awful mean, pizen scamp, Miss Graceful; but then I'll bet you a fip he's got a bee in his bonnet afore this."

"What do you mean by that, Joe?" Grace asked.

"I mean he'll not go taggin' after you and me soon again."

"Joe!" Grace exclaimed, as a thought flashed through her brain, "did you kill him when you fired upon the enemy just before we started?"

"I don't know, Graceful; I didn't wait to see," was Joe's response; "but I rather think he keeled over as though he had one of his wings clipped."

"I should be sorry, Joe, if you had killed him, much as he might deserve death."

"Why, Graceful, that wouldn't be any love lost, would that?"

"No, not on my part; but then, I should regret to know that you, a boy, had slain a fellow-being."

"It wouldn't sound well, I'll admit; but then we folks raised in the West look at such things different from what you do, Graceful. It's either peace or death here; there's no half-way grounds. It's run or fight—live or die."

"But I am afraid you all overlook the duty of Christians," Grace answered.

"No, we all go to meetin' whenever the preacher 'll let up on deer and elk huntin' long enough to give us a sermon. I know the Lord's awful good to me, and helps me out of lots of bad scrapes; but then a feller's jist bound to shoot. Our enemies are no respecters of saint or sinner, and I can't see but that it's a Christian duty to civilize an Injin or renegade, even if it has to be done with a chunk of lead instead of the gospel. Everybody seems tooller the course laid out for him by the Lord or the Old Scratch, and the best man wins. An Injin but follers the instinct of his nature, and the devil is that nature. So it is with the good and bad; don't it seem so, Graceful?"

"I see you believe in things being foreordained, Joe," said Grace, with a smile.

"I don't know what you call it, Graceful, but if I git back to camp alive, I'll know the Lord intended it should be so; but if I am to die, I'll die, and that's plain enough. The Lord knows where we're going this very minute, and if we are going into danger, why don't he stop us if he don't want us to git hurt or killed?"

The last word had scarcely fallen from his lips when a line became detached from one of the elk's horns, and stopping the team, the youth got out to replace it. As he walked around in front of the animals, he found they were standing upon the steep bank of a water-course that had worn a deep channel across the plain.

"Great mollyhorns!" burst involuntarily from Joe's lips; "if the elks had taken two more steps we'd 'a' been plunged over into Snake Creek!"

"Oh dear!" exclaimed Grace, shuddering with fear, "what a narrow escape! There, you see, Joe, that we were going into danger, and the hand of Providence intervened and saved us. Had the line not become detached, you would have stopped as you did."

"I'll acknowledge the corn, Miss Graceful; but then wasn't it all so ordained?" replied the lad, re-entering the sleigh; "but then, I'm really sorry it wasn't ordained otherwise than that

this plagued creek must be here, for it's goin' to give us trouble."

"Why, Joe, can't we cross it anywhere?"

"I'm afraid not; I know we can't go back and head it, nor I don't believe we can cross it between here and the Lizard river. It is a deep, treacherous channel all the way across the prairie. It's a regular snake, sure enough, in the grass. Now, to get across the river, I see, plain enough, that we have got to work west at least five miles, and that'll throw us out of the way ten miles. Dash the luck, I say!" and the youth spoke as if half-discouraged.

"Oh, well," replied Grace encouragingly, "we can soon make that distance. If we don't get to camp by dark, we'll get there soon after."

"I don't mind the blunder on account of the extra distance we'll have to travel, but the advantage it'll give the Ingins. If they should figure out the result of this oversight, they may meet us up the river. You see they can easily cut across lots and git in ahead of us. I'll declare I hate this, Miss Graceful. I don't see what I was doin' that I didn't think of this before."

"I regret it, also, Joe," replied the maiden, "but then it cannot be expected that a boy will, or can think of everything. I think you have already exceeded yourself in every respect."

"Well, there's only one way of it, Graceful; and so we'll have to make the best we can of that," replied our hero, turning westward. "But I know the dashed blunder's goin' to throw us into the night, if not into the hands of the Ingins."

Grace saw that the youth was bitterly disappointed, and that his manly pride had been deeply wounded by what he had seen fit to term a blunder. She knew that it was his indomitable courage, presence of mind, physical endurance, and hope of success that had led him on in his wonderful adventures; and should his young spirit give way under this disappointment when it had been so buoyant and hopeful, there would be little prospect of their escape. So she endeavored to relieve his mind of its depression by kind and encouraging words, in which she expressed full confidence in his ability to cope with the dangers before them.

They journeyed on over a rough, broken plain until about the middle of the afternoon, when they reached the timber bordering the Lizard river. When they had reached the river itself, Joe concluded to follow down the stream upon the ice. It would be a little further to camp, it was true, but then he felt sure he could more than make up the extra distance in having the advantage of a smooth, level and well-defined route. Acting upon this conclusion, they were soon speeding down the river; and after journeying a mile or two upon their new course, the youth drew up under a high sheltering bank to rest and feed his team. He cut some green linden bushes, which he placed before the animals, and from which they neatly trimmed the buds and twigs in a few minutes.

Grace told Joe that Cudmore had placed some provision under the sleigh-seat the day before; and upon examination, the fugitives were delighted to find a portion of it still there, along with the doctor's medicine-case and a flask of brandy. They made a hearty dinner off the cold provisions, and felt greatly relieved.

Grace finally got out of the sleigh and walked around to relieve her body of the cramp her long confinement had made so painful.

When the elks had trimmed up the boughs placed before them, Vagabond Joe harnessed them to the sleigh, and their journey continued, the faithful, never faltering animals showing no signs of fatigue.

Night finally settled over wood and plain; and for the first time in many days, the storm subsided and a clear, frosty sky burst from its long, dark confinement. The stars studded the blue vault, making it almost as light as day where no shadows lurked. The air became keen and crispy.

"I'm afraid," Joe finally remarked, "that we're goin' to have a spell of weather colder'n Greenland's icy mountains. Cold snaps that jist freeze the hair off of a buffalo-robe generally follers sich storms."

"I hope you may prove a false prophet, this time, Joe," Grace replied.

"Yes, I wish we could have to-night and to-morrer fair as a June day, and we'd all git out of this plagued creek. I'm gittin' enough of adventure this pop, Miss Graceful. I can stand haydoogins of fun with the men and boys, but when it comes to two pretty gals, tender as angels, shiverin' and sufferin', it takes all the starch out of me; and don't you forget it."

"Do you think we will find our friends all safe at camp?", Grace answered.

"I hope so, though the Lord only knows the real truth of the matter. I don't think any of the red-skins got in ahead of us, and if they didn't, why, we'll be down there to camp inside of an hour or two."

"Oh, I pray we will find them safe! though even if we should, I will not be entirely at rest," said the maiden.

"What now, Miss Graceful? tryin' to borrow trouble?" laughed Joe.

"No, no, Joe, my dear, little friend; it is no fancied trouble, but real; the night I was captured by Cudmore and the road-agents, my friend, a gentleman who was traveling with me, was taken from the stage and carried off—no doubt, and murdered."

"Why didn't you tell me somethin' 'bout that before, Graceful?" the lad inquired.

"I did not wish to trouble your mind with any more cares than you already had to contend with. I have not told you half of my troubles, Joe."

Joe made no reply for he at once became busied with his own thoughts.

The snow freezing, crunched and creaked dimly and icily under the hoofs of the animals and the runners of the cutter.

Wolves howled in the distance, and the rabbits venturing from their burrows along the shore, played to and fro across the river before the travelers like weaver's shuttles.

Suddenly a cry burst from Joe's lips and he reined in his elks.

A huge fire, that lit up the river with a dazzling glare, burst suddenly upon his view as they rounded an abrupt bend in the stream. It was burning upon the left bank.

"My great conscience, Graceful!" the boy exclaimed, "the Indians are in ahead of us! they have anticipated our comin', and what in heaven's name are we to do?"

A cry of hopeless despair burst from the maiden's lips.

Vagabond Joe glanced to the right and left. The banks were steep. He could turn to neither side.

"Graceful, we'll have to turn back," he said.

Grace's courage gave way under this disappointment, and she burst into tears. But those tears seemed to fire the soul of the boy with all the resolution and courage to which the spirit of man is heir. He glanced back and discovered half a dozen shadowy figures coming down the river behind him. They were Indians. The fugitives were surrounded, for he knew that others in ambush waited before.

"Grace," he said, "pray for God to help us. There are savages, with death in their hearts, before us and behind us. We have got to run the gauntlet, or die in the attempt!"

He then spoke to his trained elks—spoke sharply.

At the top of their speed the animals shot forward with fearful rapidity.

The savages behind gave a frightful yell.

Dark figures instantly glided out from the shadows of the shore, and forming in the light across the river, stood ready to dispute the passage of the fugitives.

As he approached them, Vagabond Joe drew his revolver.

Grace covered her face and bowed her head in meekness to her fate.

CHAPTER XXI.

A DASH, A CRASH, AND ALL IS OVER.

A WILD, savage yell rose on the night.

The crash of firearms rung out and bullets whistled about the ears of the fugitives.

The elks seemed to comprehend the dangers of their master, and shot forward with renewed speed.

On every side rose the wild demand to halt; but heeding it not, Vagabond Joe urged on his elks.

A moment later there was a sudden crash, a groan and pistol-shot. Joe and Grace were pitched forward almost from the sleigh, which came to a sudden stop, then, as suddenly, shot away again.

It was quite evident that the savages had resolved upon taking Joe, his protegee and team alive, for they could easily have shot the latter down. Instead, however, four stalwart warriors threw themselves in front of the animals and seized upon them when they found they could not stop them otherwise. But the braves had reckoned without their host. The moment they laid violent hands upon the elks, the animals, as if maddened by the terrible excitement of the moment, uttered a strange, hoarse cry, and rearing upon their hind-feet, struck down

the savages with their fore-feet as easily as though they had possessed the power of a thunderbolt. Then, with a sudden, and unexpected bound, the animals shot away—snatching the fugitives from the very grasp of a score of hands already extended to seize them.

Into the darkness, beyond the reach of the light, glided the sleigh—away around a bend it disappeared, while on in swift pursuit went the yelling hordes of Ishtahaba.

"Thank the Lord, Graceful!" cried Joe, when he, at length, found they were really safe.

Grace's lips were already moving in prayer. When she had finished, she lifted her eyes to Joe's, and said:

"Oh, Joe! Joe! God is very good to you and me; but do you think we are safe now?"

"I do, Miss Graceful," the young borderman replied, his heart swelling with manly pride; "I think the red-rovers of Satan concentrated the whole of their infernal clan back there, and made one last, grand effort to recapture you. And, to tell the truth, I was afraid they'd succeed. I was afraid they'd shoot the elks, and it's the greatest wonder in the world they didn't. But, how they knowed we war comin' down the river is a mystery to me; but then a confounded, dashed Inglin is a mystery, anyhow. Oh, great mollyhorns! if Baalbec and Nineveh didn't put a hull nest of bees into a couple redskins' bonnets, I don't want a copper—just knocked them a-flukin' heels over appetite."

"Your team, Joe, seem possessed of almost human intelligence and devotion," said Grace.

"Oh, yes! they're sailors, Graceful. I raised 'em from wee dumplin's of kids, and took all the pains in the world to learn 'em some gumption. Now, I can ride Baalbec like a hoss; but Nin—why, she's naterly womanish when she gits her he'd set; but when it comes to runnin', I tell you what, Graceful, *she* gits up and brindles, and don't you forgit it."

A smile lit up the face of the maiden.

A momentary silence ensued, when Joe continued:

"Well, we'll soon be at camp now; we just passed the old camp where I first rescued you."

"Indeed?" replied Grace, too full of joy over their escape and the expected pleasure of meeting Captain Howard, for further utterance.

They glided on and at length turned from the river into the woods. A few rods from the stream a voice suddenly cried:

"Who comes there?"

"Joe," answered our hero, "whose surname is Vagabond."

"Is that a fact?" exclaimed the guard; "we were afraid you had got into trouble, Joe. But I see you've got your team back."

"Yes; and Miss Graceful, too."

"Drive on to camp, Joe, and let us all rejoice together," said the guard, and he gave utterance to a shout of joy that at once brought his friends from the snow-house.

"By go-lomminy! it's Vagabond Joe!" cried Old Neutral Bill, as the boy drew up in front of the hunters' quarters; "and he's got Miss Manville, as true as I am a born sinner! Yoop! yoop! hurrah for Vagabond Joseph!"

A prolonged shout burst from the lips of the party.

"Take it cool, boys, for the red-skins are folerin' us up," said Joe, "and we may all have to holler out of t'other side of our mouths afore mornin'. But say, Billiam, are the captain and Miss Myrtle safe?"

"Safe and sound as a hound's tooth," replied Old Bill.

With a wildly fluttering heart, and mind filled with a dreadful uncertainty, Grace Manville was assisted from the sleigh and conducted into the hut.

Captain Ralph Howard, pale and weak, rose as she entered, and as their eyes met there was a momentary silence; then a cry burst from the maiden's lips and the next moment she was clasped to the breast of her lover.

Joe came softly into the hut, his boyish face aglow with manly pride and triumph; and stealing around to where Myrtle sat, he put out his hand and said:

"Good-evening, Myrtle."

"Why, Joe!" the maiden exclaimed, her blushing cheeks and drooping eyes telling a tale that her lips could not utter; "I am very glad to see you back safe. We were all afraid you had been captured by the Indians, or had perished in the storm."

"Well, I did have an almighty wild time of it, Myrtle," he said, still holding her little hand that was trembling with her emotions of joy and love; "and we just escaped by a hair's breadth. But, how's the time been passed with you folks?"

"Very pleasantly under existing circumstances. I have found Mr. Howard to be a very intelligent and entertaining gentleman. Oh! I am so glad, on his account, that you rescued that lady."

"Gosh!" whispered Joe, "isn't she pretty?"

Myrtle started as if half-envious of the compliment; and, glancing at Grace, replied:

"She appears to be a very nice lady."

"Yes, and she's brave as she's handsome, I tell you!" added Vagabond.

"Have you fallen in love with her, Joe?" whispered Myrtle, a smile flitting over her pretty doll-face.

"No, Myrtle; I can't love but one gal at a time," was the young lover's response, bending his gaze full upon Myrtle, with a look that implied a world of meaning—a look she did not fail to interpret. Old Bill and his companions withdrew from the camp—some of them to take care of Joe's team; others to procure more fuel.

Captain Howard introduced Grace to Myrtle, and in a very short time the two unfortunate girls had conceived a regard for each other that continued to increase with their acquaintance.

Captain Howard had, by this time, so far recovered from his injuries as to be able to walk about; and, as soon as the excitement of their meeting was over, he and Joe went outside to hold a private consultation regarding their situation and future course.

Joe gave his opinion unreservedly upon the subject, for he knew the Indians were in hot pursuit, and would soon be upon them. He advised the closest watch and strictest precaution during the night; and, if unmolested when morning came, to break camp and make for the settlement.

And acting upon this advice, the guards were doubled, and every measure of precaution possible was taken.

The weather was still growing colder, making mittens, gloves and mufflers not only a comfort, but a necessity.

When assured that all measures of safety had been made in accordance with his military judgment, Captain Howard returned to the camp, and, seating himself by Grace, said:

"Grace, I was never so astounded as when I first saw you, a few nights ago, in the tent with Dr. Cudmore, up at the Indian camp."

"No doubt of it, Ralph," the maiden replied, "and I assure you my surprise was no less great when I learned from Joe that you were in this country."

"It seems as though the Allwise Being has had something to do in sending me here. It was not my intention, Grace, when I last wrote you, to come so far West; but I changed my mind after I came into eastern Iowa, and by the unanimous voice of my party, we came on to Fort Dodge. I am very glad, now, that we did come."

"Nor was it my intention, when I last wrote you, of coming West," replied Grace; "but a very dear relative in Fort Dodge insisted upon my coming here at once, upon business of great importance to both him and me. Under these circumstances, I could not refuse him; and so I wrote you the fact, directing my letter to Selkirk, as usual; and in company with my relative's agent, a Mr. Sampson, I started upon my long journey. All went well until we arrived at Fort Des Moines, when the cold weather set in, making our journey a heavy and disagreeable one. But we worried along, and when but an hour or two's drive from our destination—after three weeks' tiresome travel—the stage was attacked by Cudmore and his gang, and I forcibly carried away. Mr. Sampson was also taken out of the stage and away by two or three of the men; but what they did with him I know not, though I fear the worst."

"Perhaps he was acting in conjunction with your abductors," Howard suggested.

"No, no, Ralph, never; he was a too noble and high-born gentleman to stoop to such villainy. I am almost certain that he and I were the intended victims of a foul conspiracy. Cudmore's presence here convinced me of this fact the moment I saw his loathsome face, and heard his detested voice."

"Well, through the kindness of Heaven, you have been saved from his contaminating touch; and yet I should like to put a bullet through his heart," and Captain Howard's face was hard and stern.

"I am of the opinion he will not trouble us again. I mistrust that brave Joe has killed him; though the lad would not admit that he had; neither would he deny it."

"I hope, for the sake of peace, that the villain has been summoned to a final account," replied the captain; "in the morning, however,

we will start for the settlement, and when there, perhaps we may learn something further of this attack upon the stage."

"I presume," said Grace, "that Uncle Jerry Grimes will not consider me as good as my promise."

"Whom did you say?" interrupted Myrtle, "Uncle Jerry Grimes?"

"Yes; do you know him, Miss Gray?"

"Yes, ma'am, I am well acquainted with him: I stayed two days and nights at his house with his niece, Miss Irene Lamar, who lately came there from Tennessee."

Grace Manville's face turned an ashen pallor; her wondrous eyes flashed with a strange light, and turning, she laid her hand upon Myrtle's arm, and said in an excited tone:

"Do you mean to say, Miss Gray, that Irene Lamar, of Tennessee, has arrived at the residence of Jerry Grimes?"

"Yes, ma'am. As I said before, I stayed there awhile with her, and would have remained longer had I not taken a dislike to her. But Uncle Jerry thinks the world and all of her, for she's very pretty and smart; but I believe she's a bad woman."

"Oh, Miss Gray!" exclaimed Grace, her face assuming a serious, troubled look, "if Irene Lamar, of Tennessee, is at Glendale with her uncle, Jerry Grimes, then I am a vile impostor!"

CHAPTER XXII. STRANGE DOINGS AT GLENDALE.

MATTERS at Glendale had assumed a rather serious aspect. Uncle Jerry had been suffering greatly for several days from the effects of violent pains in the head, and an almost total suspension of the vital action of the heart and entire system. His nephew and niece, Mave Conrille and Irene Lamar, evinced great uneasiness, and finally concluded to send for Doctor Wright.

The doctor came post-haste, and found the old gentleman suffering with acute pains in the head, from the effects of which there was a tendency to deliriousness. Doctor Wright was a well-read physician, as the saying goes, and having examined the patient's pulse and tongue, questioned him regarding his illness and so forth, he proceeded to make a careful diagnosis of the case; and the result finally arrived at was anything but pleasant. The doctor betrayed his surprise in his looks, and having expressed the wish for a private conversation with the old man, Mave and Irene withdrew from the sick chamber.

"Uncle Jerry," Dr. Wright then said, in a low tone, "your case presents very singular and startling conditions, indeed—some things, in fact, which have never come under my hands before; although similar cases are well known to the profession."

"Is it anything of a dangerous character, doctor?" the old man asked. "Speak right out; let the truth be known."

"It certainly is dangerous, Mr. Grimes; though with a proper understanding, and application of remedies, danger may be averted," replied the doctor.

"I have placed myself under your care, doctor," Uncle Jerry remarked, suggestively.

"Very well, Uncle Jerry; then I am going to enter right in upon the merits of the case," and then for fully an hour he questioned the old man as to his diet, his habits of living, and, in fact, everything that would have bearing upon his health. This examination concluded, he administered a powder to quiet his patient's nerves and allay the pain that was darting like needles through his brain.

As it was nearly night, the doctor had concluded to remain till morning in order to watch the course which the old man's disease took under treatment. He was in the sick-room when darkness set in. Uncle Jerry was resting easier, and all was quiet, when Irene entered the room with a light made in an old-fashioned lamp, the bowl of which was supported upon the head of a brass satyr. She placed the light upon the stand by the bedside, and having inquired after her uncle's health, and received, from the doctor, the assurance that he was resting easier, she went out into the sitting-room.

Doctor Wright watched by his patient's bedside until he—the patient—fell asleep. Then he bent over him and listened to his breathing. When he again resumed his seat he shook his head dubiously, and, at the same time, manifested doubt and perplexity.

Uncle Jerry slept for an hour or two, then awoke with a violent start, complaining of a terrible pain in the head, and a feeling of suffocation in the chest and lungs.

"It seems to me the ventilation of this room

is not as good as it might be, Uncle Jerry; and yet, it is not any too warm. Do you always sleep with a light burning by your bedside?"

"Always."

"What kind of oil do you burn?"

"Simply lard; it's the best we can get."

"And what kind of wick?"

"The common cotton candle-wicking."

"Well, there's something in the atmosphere of this room that I do not exactly like. I must confess my ignorance of the cause of it, unless it is the light. I would suggest, Uncle Jerry, that you dispense with a burning light and see what effect it will have. I will now give you a mild nerveine, and then remove the light."

He administered the medicine, and taking the light went out into the room where Mave and Grace were seated.

"I have concluded," he said, "to remove the light from the sick chamber for fear the exhalation of the smoke and volatile gases might be the cause of aggravating his case."

Irene arose, and taking the light blew it out, for the sitting-room was lighted by a candle and the fire on the hearth.

The doctor sat down and conversed freely upon different topics with Irene and her cousin.

About midnight the maiden retired, while the physician and Mave remained up to attend to the wants of the sick man, and to give medicine.

Uncle Jerry, however, rested quietly; and as he did not wake, the doctor concluded that sleep was nature's own medicine, and so he would not waken the invalid to administer his own prescriptions.

The night wore slowly away, and when Uncle Jerry awoke in the morning he expressed great relief from his rest, and a belief that Doctor Wright's medicine was the cause of it.

After breakfast the doctor took his leave, having left a supply of medicine, with directions for giving the same, promising to return the next morning, unless they should send for him sooner.

"Of all you do," he said to Irene, "don't let the lamp burn in the sick-room. I believe that habit alone, which many people practice, is the real cause of more affected lungs and severe headaches than any other, and it should be stopped. One can get used to anything."

Uncle Jerry was up most of the day. He talked, laughed, and joked with the young folks in a spirit that indicated a speedy recovery.

When night again set in the old gentleman retired early with the promise of a night's rest.

Of course, the lamp was not brought into his room, although Uncle Jerry missed it very much; and wondering if it had, really, been the cause of his illness, he finally fell asleep. At first his slumber was quiet and sweet, but as the night advanced he began to toss and moan. A burning fever parched his lips, and a piercing, throbbing pain tortured his brain. Half delirious, he rose in his bed to find his room flooded with light. On the stand, by his bedside, was burning the forbidden lamp.

The old man was rendered almost frantic by this discovery. He sprung out of bed and started toward the light; but he stopped suddenly and started back as though some horrible form had risen up, Phoenix-like, out of the dull-glowing flame.

"My God! do they want to kill me?" he cried, clutching his brow in tragical madness; "has it come to this so soon?"

With a groan he reeled toward the bed and fell upon it. He lay there for hours, totally unconscious, and when he at length rallied from the horrible spell that seemed to enchain his very reason, he started up and gazed wildly, deliriously about the room.

It was just growing day, although there was a lingering darkness in his room. He glanced toward the stand. *The lamp had been removed!*

The doctor came that morning as he had promised. Uncle Jerry took him aside and told him how he had passed the night, and how he was then feeling.

"Did you do as I requested about the light?" asked the doctor.

"I did; but in the night some of the family brought it into my room and left it burning there. Before morning, however, it was removed."

"That's rather queer conduct," declared the doctor, bluntly.

"It is, most assuredly, doctor; it looks as though my new relatives wished to get rid of me."

The doctor gazed hard at the patient, and drummed thoughtfully upon the table with his fingers. He whistled softly to himself.

"Mr. Grimes," he finally said, "I would like to see that lamp."

"Your wish shall be gratified, doctor," and the old man went out and brought in the lamp. Dr. Wright examined it closely.

"I can see nothing wrong about it, nor am I prepared to make an analysis; but, Uncle Jerry, I'm going to make an experiment. I want a glass of clear water to begin with."

Old Wallack was summoned and the water ordered. When it was brought in, the doctor placed the glass upon the bedroom stand and lit the lamp and placed it by the water. Then the physician and his patient went out into the sitting-room, and closed the door behind them.

Seating themselves, they spent several hours discussing the events of the day, and the mysterious disappearance of Myrtle Gray.

Mave Conrille had gone over to Fort Dodge, and Irene was busy in the kitchen.

Toward noon, the doctor returned to the bedroom to examine into the result of his experiment. A cry burst from his lips the moment his eyes fell upon the water in the glass. It was covered with a white, filmy powder.

"Ah! it is as I expected!" exclaimed the doctor; "do you see that thin powder on the surface of that water, Uncle Jerry?"

"I do, doctor; tell me what causes it," replied the old man, betraying great anxiety.

"Uncle Jerry," said the physician, gravely, "either the wick in that lamp, or the lard that feeds it, is strongly impregnated with arsenic. This becomes volatilized by combustion, poisons the atmosphere of the room, and causes this deposit upon the surface of the water."

"My God, doctor! then I was right—they, my own sister's children, are trying to kill me by slow poison!" exclaimed the old man, wringing his hands in distress.

"There is something wrong, Uncle Jerry," declared Dr. Wright, "and yet, I would advise you to act calmly in the premises. Repeat to your young friends my desire that no light be permitted to burn in your room; and if they disregard your wishes then I would take some steps to thwart their designs, if, in fact, they are parties to an intended crime. It is my opinion Mr. Newbold is exerting a bad influence over your nephew, and, perhaps, your niece, also. I was told this morning by Myrtle Gray's mother that the maiden had, by some means or other—she did not say what—while a visitor here, become witness to a plot which I think is being worked up through the instrumentality of this lamp. Mrs. Gray had said nothing about it through fear, until yesterday. She thinks her daughter has been a victim to the same plotters; for it appears that one of them found out that Myrtle knew all about their plot. Your niece, I am sorry to say, and Isaiah Newbold, are the chief actors in this conspiracy. It was a knowledge of these facts, Uncle Jerry, that led to my experiment with the glass of water. I disliked, very much, to introduce such a delicate subject. I knew you thought a great deal of your nephew and niece, and that the news would be a severe shock; but then, I felt it was not only my duty as a physician to tell you, but as a Christian."

"Oh, my God!" groaned the old man; "is this the reward I am to receive for making those children my companions, my heirs? Have I taken serpents to my bosom instead of friends? Oh! that I had heeded Myrtle Gray's warning! that I had not been so blind in my love for those who seek to destroy me! Doctor, this is a terrible blow."

"Bear up, Uncle Jerry; do not give way. There may be some misunderstanding. Trust in God for the best," said the doctor, kindly, cheerfully.

CHAPTER XXIII.

THE VALLEY OF HOBAMOCKO.

THE precaution taken by Vagabond Joe and Neutral Bill in guarding their camp in the forest upon the banks of the Lizard was not in vain. As Joe had expected, the Indians had followed him up to camp, when a sharp engagement ensued; though, without any decided result—more than to warn the savages that the whites were ready for them.

After the first attack the red-skins withdrew, and nothing more was seen of them till next morning, when several scouts were discovered, here and there, among the trees.

The mercury had, by this time, fallen ten degrees below zero, making the air stinging cold. The snow seemed knitted together in a solid body—so hard that a man could walk anywhere upon it without breaking through. Taken altogether, however, it was favorable to our friends, for the crusted snow would enable them to make a rapid retreat, even if it did give the

enemy the same advantage in following them up.

Instead of growing warmer when the sun rose up over the tree-tops, it grew colder; and the men on guard actually suffered.

"I tell ye what, boys," declared Old Bill, "it's no use talkin' 'bout goin' to the fort today; for it's growin' colder and colder every second. My fingers are so cold now that ye could break 'em off like pipe-stems; and if we attempted to cross Ten Mile Prairie, we'd all freeze stiffer 'n pokers. Them tender little gals would freeze less 'n no time; I know they would."

"Well, what are we to do?" demanded Captain Howard.

"We'd better stick to the timber. We can weather her through here as long as we keep our sculps in the right place."

"I'll tell you what we might do," said Vagabond Joe, to whom all listened with respect; "we might travel as far as the timber goes and then camp again. By bearin' a leetle to the south we will strike the South Lizard valley; and there it won't be so cold. Here we git all of the north wind fresh from the open plain, and I tell you what, it's enough to singe the hair off a dog's back."

"I don't know but the boy's right," said Old Bill.

"He generally is," remarked one of the hunters.

"Then suppose we break camp at once and start for the South Lizard valley," suggested Howard. "I think I can walk there without any trouble."

To this suggestion all readily agreed, and in a few minutes they were ready for departure.

Vagabond Joe harnessed Baalbec and Nineveh to his "jumper," in which Myrtle and Grace were given seats. The youth was to walk behind and drive the team, while the rest of the party, excepting Howard, were to be deployed upon each side, before and behind, to cover their retreat.

In this order the journey began, the savages following up; though keeping a goodly distance from the unerring long-range rifles of the hunters.

Their progress was very slow, owing to an unexpected trouble. The sharp hoofs of the elks broke through the snow, which kept the animals lunging and worrying along in a manner that retarded their progress. The women were, at times, compelled to walk, and had he not known the young master's great love for his elks, Old Bill would have advised him to unharness them and turn them loose. They could have made time without the team, and yet the old trapper could not muster up the courage to suggest it be abandoned.

Myrtle and Grace would have enjoyed the journey very much, had it not been for the constant danger lurking upon the trail. They preferred walking to riding, for they could keep warmer by the exercise, and then it lightened the burden of the elks, for whom Grace cherished the feelings of a Bergh.

The girls had conceived a mutual affection, strong as sisterly love. Their young spirits seemed to flow as smoothly together as the limpid waters of two musical brooks; and in each other's society they experienced a great mental relief.

The course of the party lay toward the southeast; and about noon they struck the east ridge overlooking the valley of the Hobhamocco, or in other words, the home of the Evil Spirit. This name had been applied to the valley by the Indians. It was a narrow valley, so deep and densely wooded that the sunlight seldom found its way to the damp, moldy earth.

The red-skins had, doubtless, conceived a similarity in the shadows of this valley, and that wherein dwelt the Evil Spirit, as taught them by tradition: and had kept aloof from the place with superstitious fear through all the long ages they had occupied the country. Even the white man, and animals, had become imbued with a similar distrust and passed by the valley of Hobhamocco with hasty footsteps and staring eyes.

But, from the summit of the east side, the valley of the Evil One did not look so ghostly that cold, December day. There was no foliage upon the trees to deepen the shadows; and so the noon tide sun beating down into the valley, whose environing hills shut out the chill winds, gave it a look of warmth and comfort inviting to the weary travelers.

"It'd be a jolly place to camp down there," proclaimed Vagabond Joe. "The Ingins wouldn't molest us unless some white villain should convince them that it is all moonshine

'bout it bein' the home of the Old Scratch. I'll tell you, friends, I always had a kind of a reverence for this valley. I don't know why it is. It always impressed me with a feeling that's just like my remotest recollections of chilhood—recollections that are so mixed up that I can't git head nor tail of them—dreams begun, but never finished."

"Wal, I never had any very romantic feelin' for the valley," declared Old Bill; "and so I allers give her a wide berth. I hav'n't been this close to the place for seven or eight years. I war never here in winter time before. And, to come right to facts, I war never in the valley in my life; nor I never seed any body who was."

"Strange, indeed," said Captain Howard, "that the minds of men become so affected by superstitious stories. Still, it is but the general result of one's surroundings. The mind, no difference how well-educated, seems to seek a level even lower, like water, with the general surface surrounding it. This is one of the facts of civilization that no argument can gainsay."

"I don't go anything on scientific doctrine, capt'in," put in Bildad Meeks. "Solid facts tell for 'emselves. The reason this valley is shunned is because it is; and that's all that is of it."

The party continued on a short ways, when an exclamation suddenly burst from Joe's lips, and stopping his team, he said, pointing into the valley:

"By mollyhorns, boys! do you see that?"

"Wal, what?" demanded Old Bill.

"That column of blue smoke rising from that big snow-mound," was the youth's response.

Every eye was at once directed toward the object in question. A thin wreath of blue smoke, just discernible against the white hill beyond, was seen curling slowly up into the air from an immense mound of snow that seemed to have been thrown, like a great white sheet, over a clump of dense bushes.

"There's a fire under that snow-pile," announced Joe; "that I am determined on. And it appears to me that's the top of a chimney it's issing from. What do you think 'bout it, Cap?"

"It really does look like a chimney; and it is my opinion that there is a cabin there covered with an immense snow-drift."

"I never hear of such a thing afore," protested Old Bill. "If it is a cabin, it must 'a' been put there recently—what d'ye think, Joe?"

"I don't know what to think," said Joe, gazing thoughtfully up and down the valley, as if trying to recall something of the vague past; "but I'll declare, I either dreamed of a cabin in this valley once, or else I've seen it some time in the dim past. I actually don't know which it is—whether either; but then, I've got it runnin' in my head that way; and so I am goin' down into that valley to look around now and see who has got a fire under that snow-pile, anyhow. It may be a friend; and if so, we might find quarters with him a day or so till the cold weather subsides."

"I'm afraid, Joe, that you'll get into trouble if you go down there," observed Captain Howard. "It may be a pack of red-skins burrowed under that snow-drift."

"I'll run all risks, anyhow," Joe decided, "if you folks 'll take care of Baalbec and Nineveh."

"Do be careful, Joe," said Grace Manville, earnestly; while Myrtle fixed a look upon the lad's face that betrayed the deepest anxiety and concern.

Vagabond Joe shouldered his rifle and sauntered leisurely down the steep hillside, his friends watching him with intense interest. When he reached the edge of the narrow valley he stopped and looked around him as though he had been suddenly placed in some serious dilemma, or else had lost or forgotten something.

"I tell you what, my friends," averred the captain, "this valley appears to impress the mind of that boy with something of more than common interest."

"He acts very queer, I declar'," admitted the president of the school-board; "but then, that very Vagabond Joe is an enigma, take him as you will."

"I never, in all my born days, see'd his beat," declared Old Bill; "he's not afraid of the devil, and's full of more tricks, and pure boy cussedness than any young kid that ever capered over these 'ere parerosses."

Vagabond Joe moved carefully forward toward the great snow-pile, from which smoke was issuing, and in a few moments stood at its base. With his rifle in the hollow of his arm he began moving around the bank, and soon disappeared from view of those upon the hill watching his every movement.

When the boy had gained the west side of the mound, he discovered a narrow, black-throated opening leading through the snow and a dense growth of wild vines and bushes, to the interior of the huge mound.

For a moment the youth stood undecided as to the course he should pursue; but, finally, he stepped into the passage and began stealing cautiously along its dark windings. He had not gone far when, to his utmost surprise, he struck the wall of a log cabin. Over and around the cabin, wild grapevines and parasites had interwoven a mesh so dense 'hat the snow had not sifted through, but lodging upon the outside, aided the vines in concealing the cabin from view.

Decay and ruin, mold and must of years hung over and around this hidden domicile. And yet, there was an abundance of external evidence of its having been quite recently occupied—no doubt by some snow-bound hunter, fugitive or Indian. At least, this was the conclusion at which Joe arrived, for he could not think that any others than those named would be there alone in that desolate, God-forsaken valley.

A passage along the base of the building had been recently cut through the vines, and following this around, Joe finally came to the door of the building. Here he paused, and again listened. He could hear no sound within. An ominous, deathlike stillness pervaded the darksome place that seemed more like a catacomb rife with a rank and unwholesome odor.

Gathering courage, however, Joe finally raised his hand and with his knuckles rapped softly upon the door.

Instantly, a faint sound within was heard. Then footsteps were heard approaching the door—slowly, cautiously.

Joe's heart rose in his throat, and his hand dropped to his pistol. He stepped back a pace or two from the door, and when he heard the latch raised, and saw the door swing slowly open upon its wheezy wooden hinges, a feeling akin to horror seized upon him.

CHAPTER XXIV.

WHO WAS IN THE CABIN?

THE door of the hidden cabin swung half open. A fire burning upon the inside hung a red, dazzling beam of light out into the shadows that enveloped the form of Vagabond Joe. The glare of the light blinded him for a moment or two; but a form appearing in the doorway shut off this blinding light.

The form was that of a man—a white man.

"Who demands admittance?" he said, speaking in a weak and feeble tone.

"I, Joe, whose surname is Vagabond," replied our hero.

"What brings you here?" the man in the door again demanded.

"Curiosity," was the laconic reply.

"Will you walk in, sir?"

"If you've no objections," answered Joe, stepping across the threshold.

The youth found himself in a small room with a yawning fireplace, barren walls, upon which the dust of years had accumulated, and pervaded with an odor of must and mold. In one corner were some shelves, upon which were arranged dishes and cooking utensils, most of which were black with dirt and rust. A table sat in one corner. A few rude stools were scattered about the room. An old coon-skin cap hung upon the wall. Broken spider-webs hung in great dust-laden curtains from the joists.

"Well, stranger, you're hid away here pretty snug," said Joe, gazing around him.

"Yes; although it appears that I am found," answered the man.

"Seems to me you're not as stout as you might be, stranger," persisted the youth, regarding the stranger with a look full of boyish curiosity.

"No, my boy, I have been nearer dead than alive for a week past; and it was only by the mercy of God that I stumbled across this cabin."

"Well, well, replied Joe, "then you found this house deserted when you come here, eh?"

"Yes—with no sign of life having been here in ten years. Dirt and decay were profuse upon every side; and I must say they still remain. The house seems to have been left, with everything in it, by its owner, who never came back. I have never been in the adjoining room; as you see, the building is divided by a partition."

"It is, by mollyhorns!" exclaimed Joe, noticing the fact for the first time.

"The partition-door is barred upon the inside, and I have been too weak to break it open. God only knows what secret it holds. Had I been

shut up in a tomb I could not have been more terribly impressed with the presence of death."

"But how comes it you are here, stranger?"

"Can I trust you, my boy?" the man asked, fixing a searching look upon the boy's open, manly face.

"You can, provided you're an honest man," replied the youth, with a combination of impudence and earnestness in his tone and words. "I'm a friend to all men but mean red-skins and their meaner white allies, the cut-throats an' robbers and women-stealers."

"Women-stealers? What do you know of women that have been stolen?" demanded the man almost fiercely.

"I know enough to make me mighty suspicious of every stranger," retorted Joe.

"Answer me, boy," cried the man. "What women have been stolen?"

"Why, Miss Graceful Manville, that's who."

"My God, boy! do you know where Grace Manville is?"

"Yes, sir, I do; but what do you know 'bout her, stranger?" Joe questioned.

"I know a great deal. I was with her when she was ruthlessly torn from the stage by road-agents or brigands and carried away. I was her companion and escort, and—"

"Hold on right there, stranger," interrupted Joe. "Light begins to break in upon my knowledge box. Your name is Sampson, isn't it?"

"It is. Henry Sampson."

"It's a fact, stranger. I've heard Miss Manville talk 'bout you and lament you as probably dead."

"Do you know where she is now?"

"Yes, sir; she's not far away. I, Vagabond Joe, rescued her from the Indians twice, and it's been nip-and-tuck atwixt us since then. But seein' you're all right, and have got a good fire and warm quarters, s'pose I bring Graceful and the rest of my friends down here. That's fourteen of us, all told—two gals, one boy, and that's Vagabond Joe, and eleven men."

Sampson seemed delighted with this news, and putting his hat on, he followed Joe out of the cabin.

Joe's return had been waited upon the hill with impatience, and when his friends saw him emerge from the great snow-mound and motion them to come down into the valley, a feeling of relief and good spirits prevailed.

In a few minutes the party was ushered into the lonely, hidden cabin; and when Grace and Henry Sampson met, an exclamation of the most heartfelt joy burst from their lips, and a moment of general rejoicing followed.

"Henry!" Grace finally said. "I never expected to see you alive, for I was certain those dreadful robbers would kill you."

"They did their utmost to murder me, Grace," Sampson replied; "but during the storm I managed to slip my bonds and escape. They fired upon me, and I was hit by two balls, and came very near bleeding to death. The storm, however, favored me. The drifting snow filled my tracks, so that my enemies could not follow me. I wandered on and on through the storm, with no more idea of where I was going than a child; but the Lord favored me by leading me to this abil, where I have remained ever since. I found a ax here in this deserted hut, and with this I procured fuel. The robbers left my match-safe, so I was enabled to light a fire; and by making a snare, I was enabled to catch rabbits enough for food. But, Grace, how have you been faring all these long days and nights?"

"I have been undergoing a series of terrible adventures among the Indians of whom we have so often spoken in a spirit of jest. But, thanks to Vagabond Joe, I have been, at last, permitted to escape."

"Don't you think the attack upon our coach a premeditated affair, Grace?" asked Sampson.

"I know it was, Henry; and Dr. Cudmore was at the head of the whole affair."

"What? Dr. Cudmore, of Tennessee."

"Dr. Cudmore, of Tennessee."

"Grace, are you not mistaken?"

"I am not, Henry. It was Cudmore himself who carried me off that night, and placed me in a sleigh waiting near. I have stood face to face with him—talked to him, and know I am not mistaken."

"Great Redeemer! what does it mean? Who ever dreamed of Burton Cudmore being in the West? What has brought him here?"

"I can tell you, Henry; I have been the victim of a dreadful conspiracy. This much I have learned through this young lady, Miss Gray."

"Can this be possible?"

"Yes, it seems that my coming was antici-

pated, and that upon the night of our capture, a young lady arrived at Fort Dodge on the stage, and was at once taken to Glendale by your old friend Isaiah Newbold."

"Well," said Mr. Sampson, impatiently.

"She was duly installed mistress of Glendale, as Irene Lamar, heir-apparent to the estate and fortune of Jerry Grimes."

CHAPTER XXV.

A BLOW FROM A COWARD'S HAND.

MR. HENRY SAMPSON was completely astounded by what Grace Manville had told him. He was a man of calm judgment, cool and deliberate under the greatest provocations to excitement. In fact, he had acquired this through force of habit, for most of his life had been spent amid the world's excitements. He loved excitement, and had always sought it in the calling of a self-constituted detective. To this man and Isaiah Newbold it will be remembered Jerry Grimes intrusted the important case of hunting up the heirs to his suddenly-acquired fortune.

After these two men had started out in search of Uncle Jerry's heirs, they prosecuted the search together for some time. They finally struck the trail of one of the old gentleman's sisters. They followed it up, only to find that the sister, Ruth Lamar, and her husband, were both dead. But they had left a child—a little girl whose name was Irene. Little Irene's aunt, on her father's side, a Mrs. Manville, adopted her under the name of Grace Manville. By this she grew to womanhood. Everybody knew her as Grace Manville; and there were many of her most intimate acquaintances who never knew that her true name was Irene Lamar. In fact, she had come to regard Manville as her true name, herself; and it was this adherence to her adopted name that enabled Cudmore, Newbold and others to work up a gigantic conspiracy. Cudmore's object was to possess himself of the person of Miss Manville, who had rejected his love; while Isaiah Newbold, leaving Sampson alone to work up the case for Uncle Jerry, turned his attention to the consummation of a plan to possess himself of Uncle Jerry's wealth by presenting false heirs.

Never, until Grace Manville had recalled the fact to him, did Henry Sampson dream of a conspiracy of this kind. Never mistrusting Newbold, he had furnished that man information from time to time, that would have enabled him to carry out his work of evil more perfectly. But all was plain enough to him now. The plot had been well planned and executed, so far. Even nature seemed to have anticipated their desires and brought on the worst storm ever known in the North-west. But if it had been instrumental in helping them, it had also been the instrument of defeating them; for a glorious failure now stared the arch-plotters square in the face, though they were in blissful ignorance of the fact. The hunters and rescuers made arrangements to remain at the hidden cabin until the cold weather had subsided. In order to avail themselves of more room for their party, the partition door was again tried, but refused to yield, so, for the time being, it was permitted to retain its secret.

Guards were stationed outside, and Vagabond Joe and Neutral Bill sent out in search of game for supper.

Those in the house now entered into a general conversation, the conspiracy against Uncle Jerry Grimes forming the principal topic.

Myrtle Gray revealed all she had heard, or seen, rather, pass between Irene Lamar, the impostor, and Isaiah Newbold, the villain, the night she was a visitor at Glendale. Her story caused no little surprise and indignation among her auditors.

"Did you tell Mr. Grimes of it?" asked Bildad Meeks.

"I did not tell him the particulars; I told him to be careful, for I believed there was a conspiracy on foot against him."

"You should have told him of their silent conversation," said Mr. Sampson.

"I was afraid to," responded Myrtle, "for Irene had discovered that I was a listener to their conversation."

"Indeed!" exclaimed Grace; "then that accounts for your presence here. They wished to have you out of the way also. But I am glad of it, for this reason: believing that you cannot endanger their plans, they may not precipitate their final blow upon the head of Uncle Jerry, and this will give us time to defeat them altogether."

"No man could have convinced me that Isaiah Newbold was such a villain," remarked Sampson, regretfully. "I always took him into

my confidence; and I now see that his pretended interest in this matter has been in order to take advantage of us all. He knew well enough that but one of Mr. Grimes' sisters could be found. It is true, we traced the second one to Independence, Missouri. From there she and her husband, whose name was John Kenelm, went into Iowa, where all traces of them were lost. Her husband was an Indian fur-trader, and my opinion is, they were murdered by the Indians. At any rate, I have been unable to hear one word of them after they left Fort Des Moines, some fifteen years ago. When there, they had one child, a boy-babe of two or three years of age. They were headed west; but nothing was ever seen or heard of them after leaving the fort. All this Isaiah Newbold knew; and I suppose he and Cudmore have planned and plotted together for the purpose of securing the great fortune that is to be settled upon Irene Lamar.

"By the prophets!" exclaimed Bildad Meeks, "it'll be a stunner on them if we march down thar with all you folks, and bounce in on the onuspectin' impostors. I reckon they didn't think that Miss Manville, Mr. Sampson, and Myrtle could possibly escape Ingins, renegades, and wolves and storm; and I reckon as what they wouldn't either, if it hadn't been that we old horny-handed hunters war a providential circumstance that saved 'em."

While this conversation was going on, Vagabond Joe and old Neutral Bill were scouting the valley—one below and the other above the cabin—in search of game. Rabbits were plenty, and Old Bill was satisfied to put in his time in popping these over with his revolver; and when he had finally secured a dozen or so, he returned to the cabin and set Bildad Meeks and two others to dressing the game.

Vagabond Joe was not satisfied with such small game as rabbits; so he ventured further down the valley in hopes of finding a deer, and further than was consistent with his safety, for he suddenly found himself confronted by two savages with drawn tomahawks. They had risen out of the snow before him, and as they stood over a rod apart, Joe saw at a glance that he was in their power. If he should raise his gun to slay one, the other could slay him before he could have time to turn.

In quiet submission the youth lowered the muzzle of his rifle, and laid his hand upon his breast.

The red-skins understood his signs of surrender, and lowered their upraised tomahawks.

Joe recognized one of the Indians as the young war-chief, Red Hand, whom he had captured under the snow-drift nearly a week previous, and whom the hunters would have slain had it not been for the magnanimity of his captor, who plead for his life, and finally had him set at liberty.

"The pale-face boy is Red Hand's prisoner now," said the young chief, advancing and taking the lad's rifle from his hand.

"Yes, Red Hand, you've got the heels of me this time, sartain," replied Joe; "but I'd rather be your prisoner than any other Injin's this side of the happy hunting-grounds."

"Does the young pale-face think I will set him free, as he did me?" the Indian asked, fixing his piercing black eyes upon our hero.

"I have found the red-man to be as generous as the white man in acts of kindness."

"The pale-face dog is full of flattery and deceit, and must die," said Red Hand's savage companion; "he is cunning as the fox, and has slain many of our friends. Let his scalp ornament the lodge of Red Hand's sweetheart."

Red Hand shot a contemptuous glance at his companion, then turning to Joe continued:

"Red Hand will not be outdone in kindness by a pale-face boy. You saved my life when your friends wished to slay me; and now I will save yours when Sabulah wants it. Here is your rifle. Go back to your people. Remember Red Hand owes you nothing now. When we meet again we will meet as deadly foes."

"So be it, Red Hand," responded the boy, taking his rifle from the chief's hands, and turning his back upon the Indians.

He had not gone over fifty paces when Red Hand's companion snatched up his rifle and fired at the retreating lad.

With a groan, Joe staggered and fell to the earth.

"Why did Sabulah shoot the pale-face?" cried Red Hand, turning upon the treacherous warrior with blazing eyes.

"Because he has killed many of Ishtahaba's warriors," was the reply.

"Sabulah is a coward! He shall die!" and quicker than a flash Red Hand raised his hatchet and buried it to the eye in his companion's brain,

Then without the least sign of regret, for he felt that he had but vindicated his honor, he hurried to where Vagabond Joe lay totally unconscious, if not dead. He saw the white snow under the lad's shoulder stained with blood, and without a moment's hesitation, he lifted the lithe form of the youth in his arms, and started toward the cabin.

Those at the house were not expecting Joe when the door was opened by one of the guards, and the Indian, with his blood-dripping burden, strode unceremoniously into the room.

The presence of the Indian unannounced was, of itself, sufficient to have startled all with sudden terror; but, when their eyes fell upon the apparently lifeless form of Vagabond Joe, a cry of horror burst from every lip. All believed the youth was dead, and a pang of the most bitter agony pierced every heart.

Myrtle Gray fell fainting, and for a minute or two, the wildest confusion and sorrow prevailed.

The Indian tenderly deposited his burden upon the floor, then proudly straightening his fine form to its full height, calmly folded his arms and fixed a strange look upon the party before him.

"Red-skin," finally burst from Captain Howard's lips, "who did this bloody deed?—murdered our beloved friend?"

"A cowardly Indian shot him down after Red Hand had set him free to return to his friends," answered the chief. "The pale-face boy saved my life once, and I gave him his life. A red-skin is as generous as a pale-face when he is not a coward like Sabulah."

"Ingin, are you tellin' me the truth?" cried old Neutral Bill, frantically; "didn't you shoot him, and then carry him here with this story that you might learn our strength?"

"The boy is not dead—only wounded. He will speak soon," said the Indian.

A cry burst from the lips of Joe's friends—a cry of joy. Captain Howard and Henry Sampson at once knelt by the prostrate form of the youth, and began an examination of the body.

"But," replied Old Bill, "you didn't say whether you killed him or not."

"The boy is not dead. I slew the Indian that shot him. Is that not proof that Red Hand speaks the truth?"

"Yes, if you only did it; but I don't b'lieve you did. I b'lieve you're lying," put in the crusty Bildad Meeks.

The young chief's eyes flashed with the spirit of resentment, and glancing toward the president of the school-board with a contemptuous smile, said:

"The pale-face talks brave now; he knows he is safe; but when he was a prisoner in the power of Red Hand's warriors with the pale-face boy, he begged and cried like a squaw. But the pale-face boy, Vagabond Joe, was brave. He escaped and made Red Hand a prisoner. His friends wanted to kill the Indian, but the boy saved my life. Red Hand did not forget it. He, too, is brave and generous. He saved Vagabond Joe's life; but when he turned to go, Sabulah shot him down. Red Hand slew Sabulah. Red Hand has spoken the truth. Believe him or not. Red Hand will not raise his hand to save his life. If the pale-face believes Red Hand has lied, let him strike."

These words, spoken in plain English, produced a favorable impression on the minds of his listeners. There was that cool deliberation, that characteristic Indian pride and honor, manifested in his words and actions that carried conviction of his innocence to every heart; and, after some further conference, he was permitted to leave the cabin, and that, too, with the thanks of all.

It soon became evident that Vagabond Joe had fainted from sheer loss of blood. His whole right side was covered with blood, and in a few minutes Captain Howard and Henry Sampson had stripped him to the waist. Then search was made for the wound, and it was found to be a very severe, if not fatal, injury. The bullet, striking in the region of the spine, and glancing off, followed a rib several inches and came out in front.

"It is a wound seldom mortal where there is constitution and vigor enough to bear the loss of blood and suffering," announced Captain Howard, whose experience in the army was, in such cases, of no little consequence.

"I am afraid," murmured Henry, Sampson, "that the boy has little life left in his slender form."

"Well, he's not dead; and so we must dress the wound at once," declared Howard.

Snow was melted in an iron kettle found in the cabin, and the blood washed from the lad's

person. Then the wound was dressed as well as the party's limited means would permit. While thus engaged all noticed that Joe's right arm bore the marks of a terrible wound. From the shoulder to the elbow, there were red, rough scars that had evidently been made by the fangs of some animal.

"This is not the first time the boy has been hurt," said Sampson, pointing to the seamed and disfigured arm.

"It looks as though the flesh had been bitten and torn by an animal's teeth."

The unconscious boy was placed upon a couch, and in the course of an hour he recovered so that he was enabled to speak.

When told where he was, and assured that he was not dangerously hurt, he rallied so that he was enabled to tell the story of his adventure. Some broth made of rabbit was given him, and this did much in restoring strength and life to his body.

He corroborated Red Hand's story of his adventure in the valley in most respects, though he could not say who had fired the shot that wounded him. He felt satisfied, however, that it was not the young chief; and he felt glad that they had permitted the Indian to depart in peace from the cabin.

To all it became evident that Joe would not be able to leave the cabin for several days, unless provided with some better conveyance than was at their command; so it was decided best to send two men to the settlement for a team or two, and, also, reinforcements to assist them out of their danger. This duty devolved upon Bildad Meeks and one of Captain Howard's friends, and as soon as night fell they set out upon their cold, perilous journey.

Vagabond Joe rested very quietly, notwithstanding his weakness and pain; still Howard felt uneasy, for he knew not what hour his condition might change for the worse.

As night closed in over the hidden cabin, guards were stationed outside.

Myrtle and Grace watched by Joe's bedside, and administered to his wants with a gentle hand and a kind voice, in which all the sweetness of their woman's nature betrayed itself.

As the night wore away, and the inactivity of the men bred impatience and restlessness, one of the party said:

"I wonder why we haven't forced the door open and seen what is in that adjoining room?"

"We've been too busy, for one reason," replied Fred Manning; "but I, for one, am ready now to look in there."

"All right!" exclaimed Sampson; "but be as quiet as possible about it."

With the ax, old Neutral Bill succeeded in prying the stubborn barricade open.

A foul, musty odor came out of the room as the door swung open. Sampson plucked a blazing brand from the fire on the hearth, and passed into the unexplored apartment. As the dim, wavering light shone over the room, the party recoiled with horror at the awful spectacle that was revealed to their eyes.

CHAPTER XXVI.

A TELL-TALE DOCUMENT.

For fully a minute Sampson and his companions stood gazing around them, as if rooted to the spot with horror.

The room had evidently been used as a sitting-room and bedroom combined, for all the furniture of the scantily-furnished forest-home was still there, with the dust and mold of years upon it.

There was one window in the room, but this was barred upon the inside. Upon the walls were a few rustic picture-frames, from which the pictures, moth-eaten and time-worn, were nearly obliterated. An old-fashioned wall-clock hung upon the wall, mute with the rust of years. Here and there hung the remnants of garments. A few worm-eaten chairs were in the apartment. A table occupied a position near the closed window, and leaning forward upon this table, and supported by a chair, was a ghastly human skeleton. By the white, glistening skull was a pen, half buried in dust, and an ink-stand, from which the fluid had long since evaporated. Under the dust was found a paper upon which was written something in a bold, yet scrawling hand. But the horrors of that death-chamber did not end there. Upon a bed in one corner lay another grinning skeleton partially covered with female garments. Around the skull, masses of long silken hair lay in tangled disorder.

"My God!" exclaimed Sampson, closing the door, that his words might not reach the ears of Joe and the women; "I thought there was something deathly about this place—that it

seemed more like the home of the dead than the living."

"Ay, Sampson!" responded Captain Howard, "there must be some mystery here."

"Yes, those people have died here alone; and here, unloved, for years and years, have their skeletons remained. There is a mystery here, captain; and I presume this paper will explain it all."

He placed the torch in Howard's hand, then taking up the yellow, dusty paper, he held it close to the light and read, in a low tone, the following:

"To WHOM IT MAY CONCERN—I am dying! dying! My darling wife has already passed away to that land that knows no suffering, no sorrow. Her poor, broken heart, once happy and joyous, is forever silent. It no longer throbs for the child that has been so ruthlessly torn from our hearts by—God only knows whom or what.

"We had lived here but one year. I was to engage in the fur-trade with the Indians; but for some reason or other, the savages seemed to regard us with the same superstitious dread that they did the valley. One day our little Dick—our darling boy of three years, disappeared. I believe he was stolen; but be that as it may, it killed his poor mother, who lies upon the bed. And I, too, am dying—dying of a wound in the breast. While searching for our child, I was shot with a poisoned arrow. There is no escape for me. Already a thousand pains are piercing my body, and my brain is upon fire.

"I write this in hopes some Christian man may find our remains and give them burial. And if any one should ever read these lines, I hope he will inquire, as he passes along through life, about our child. He is a bright boy with blue eyes and light brown hair. He is no doubt among the Indians, if he has not been devoured by the wolves that even now howl at the door. Should years elapse before this is read, and our boy be grown to manhood, he can be identified by one mark alone, and that among a million. When he was a mere babe, a hungry wolf came to where he was creeping about in the doorway, and seizing him by the right arm, attempted to drag him away. It buried its cruel fangs in the tender flesh in six different places; and the imprint of the same will remain there until the day of his death, if he is not already—"

"Great Redeemer!" exclaimed John McCullum, one of the settlers, "those very identical marks are upon the arm of Vagabond Joe! Don't you remember speaking of the scars, captain?"

"I do," replied Howard.

"Light is bursting through the clouds!" exclaimed Sampson.

"Read on," said several voices.

"Should any one reading this," Sampson continued reading, "ever find a child answering to this description, I pray he will care for him. Somewhere in the West—he—my child—our boy—has an uncle named Jerry Grimes, and—"

"By Jerusalem!" again interrupted McCullum.

"Bravo!" exclaimed Sampson. "Boys, I believe I have found Margery, the sister of Jerry Grimes, at last; or rather her remains. That skeleton upon the bed is Margery's; and that boy lying in the room is her boy, and the nephew of Jerry Grimes. God certainly moves in a mysterious way, His wonders to perform. For months and months have I searched for this family; and here, after giving up all hopes, I find them by the merest accident. But I will read the rest of it:

"Somewhere in the West he—my child—our boy—he has an uncle named Jerry Grimes, and in Tennessee he has two aunts—one named Ruth Lamar, and the other named Naomi Franklin. Send our child to either of them, should any one ever find him, and you will fulfill the dying request of

"JOHN KENELM."

"Oh, my God—"

Here the strange, sad letter broke off as abruptly, as, perhaps, did the life of its author.

For a moment the little party stood silent with surprise and astonishment.

Sampson was the first to speak.

"Boys, let us place the remains of these unfortunate people together, and to-morrow we can inter them. Then we must close and fasten the door that neither the maidens nor Joe may know what a ghastly secret this room holds. I will question Joe in hopes of obtaining from him some further evidence of this having once been his father's home."

The door was closed and fastened, and in the course of the evening Sampson sat down by Joe's bedside and asked:

"Joe, how are you feeling by this time?"

"I'm feelin' pretty well, though weak as a et rag," replied the boy, with some of his old-time manner; "that red come mighty nigh puttin' a bee in my bonnet, the treacherous dog."

"I have an idea you've had many narrow escapes in your time, Joe. I saw some terrible scars upon your arm awhile since. They looked

as though a dog had been trying to gnaw your arm off. Do you remember what made them?"

"No," responded Joe, "I reckon I was a little shaver when them scars were basted on there."

"Have you any recollection of your mother or father, Joe?"

"I guess not, Mr. Sampson. As far back as I can remember is of bein' 'mong the Sioux Indians; and then one day the Sacs and Foxes come along and licked the daylights out of the Sioux, and took me to their village. I staid there a year or two, then I run away and joined the hunters over on the Neutral Grounds, where neither Sioux nor Sac and Fox would dare come."

"I presume, then, you have no recollection of having ever seen this cabin before?"

"Well, as to that, I was just thinkin', Mr. Sampson. I've either been in a cabin just like this one, or else I dreamed it."

"Joe, would you believe me if I should tell you that this is your father's house?" said Mr. Sampson.

"I don't know; it's owin' to whether you tell it as a joke or the truth."

"I tell it as the truth, Joe; this is your father's house, though your parents are both dead."

"Is that a fact, Mr. Sampson?" exclaimed Joe; "what did you find in that other room?"

"Evidence sufficient to convince me that your name is Richard Kenelm, and that you are the nephew of Jerry Grimes, and cousin of Miss Grace Manville there."

"What? Miss Graceful my cousin? Great mollyhorns!"

"Grace," said Sampson, turning to Miss Manville, "I have found the whereabouts of your aunt Margery; but both she and her husband are dead. Vagabond Joe is their child!"

A little cry of mingled joy and surprise burst from Grace's lips, and advancing to Joe's bedside, she exclaimed:

"Oh, Joe! my brave little fellow, I have felt all along that you were more than a friend to me! I thank God that I have found a relative in one so brave, so noble, so manly as Vagabond Joe!"

CHAPTER XXVII.

RIGHT versus WRONG.

HENRY SAMPSON made known the secrets of the hidden cabin, during the night, to Grace Manville and Vagabond Joe; and together the young people mourned the fate of their relatives.

On the morrow the remains of John and Margery Kenelm were consigned to a grave under the floor of the cabin, where they remained until the following summer, when they were removed to the cemetery at the Fort Dodge settlement.

On the third day after Joe had been wounded, a party of armed men arrived from the village with teams and provision for the little snow-bound party. Among them was Myrtle Gray's father, and the joy of their meeting was one that moved every heart with rejoicing, and filled every eye with tears of joy.

The next day all returned to Fort Dodge; and the very first thing that Henry Sampson did was to procure warrants for the arrest of Isaiah Newbold and his fellow-conspirators, and place them in the hands of the constable. This officer at once marched down to the land-agents' office, followed by a posse of armed men; but to his surprise, he found, on arriving there, that the office was shut up, and its owners gone.

Upon inquiry, it was found that Newbold and five other persons had left the office a few minutes previous in a four-horse sleigh, and had gone down the Des Moines.

"By heavens! they've got wind of our movements, and have escaped!" exclaimed Sampson.

"Yes, but by the everlasting, they must be overtaken and brought back!" responded the constable. "Bring out your horses and guns all of you, and let's away in pursuit!"

In a few minutes twenty men, mounted and equipped, were off like the wind. They could easily follow the track of the fugitives' sleigh. It went down the road, then turned off and took to the river, where they could travel upon the ice with great rapidity, for the snow was but a few inches deep there.

"Come on, boys!" shouted the constable, and away they all went flying down the river. They rode hard. They went like the wind. For several hours they kept up their pace, and were finally rewarded by coming in sight of the fugitives.

This gave them encouragement, and they pressed on all the harder until within hailing distance, when the constable shouted:

"Halt, there! halt, or we will fire!"

The only attention paid to his demand was a discharge of revolvers at the pursuers; and the whistling bullets, one of which killed a horse, warned the officer and his men that they must expect trouble.

"Fire, men!" yelled the constable, in no little excitement; and a moment later a volley of rifle and pistol-shots was hurled at the fugitives. Nor was it done without effect. Two of the occupants of the sleigh were seen to throw up their arms, and one of them fell from the sleigh before the others could prevent it.

The team came to a stand and an exchange of shots took place, but the fugitives' horses becoming unmanageable, they dashed away at a furious pace.

The constable rode on in pursuit.

Two of the pursuers stopped and dismounted to look at the fallen fugitive; and great was their surprise and sorrow when they looked down into the youthful and handsome face of the girl we have known as Irene Lamar.

She was dressed in male attire, and wounded unto death.

"My gracious Lord! what does this mean, Miss Lamar?" asked Mr. Gray, the father of Myrtle.

"It means the wages of sin have been paid," replied the unfortunate woman, the pallor of death settling upon her face.

"Where are you hurt, Miss Lamar? Can't I help you?" the settler asked kindly.

"No, no; I am dying—I do not want to live—death is preferable to disgrace."

"Have you sinned against Uncle Jerry, Irene?" asked the settler.

"I have—we all have—and I pray God's forgiveness," she replied. "It was a wicked conspiracy, conceived by the brain of wicked men, and partially executed by skillful, practiced hands. Isaiah Newbold was the leader in the plot, and in the very hour of our triumph news came that our victims were safe. But for that hunting-party which went West under Neutral Bill and Vagabond Joe, we would have succeeded, and I would have been heir to immense wealth. This, however, was to have been divided among a dozen conspirators."

"Young woman, this is dreadful, dreadful, indeed."

"I know it is; but then I was not so much to blame as some others," the dying woman continued; "you see, we were aware that the true Irene Lamar was to be at Fort Dodge upon a certain time; and so Newbold and his party waylaid the stage, and, capturing her and her escort, Henry Sampson, carried them away, while I, being in readiness, stepped into the stage and was taken to the village, and from there to Glendale, as Irene Lamar, niece of Jerry Grimes. The stage-driver was one of our party, and so that is the reason you heard nothing of the attack upon the stage from him. In order to act the part of Irene Lamar, I had been posted in all the affairs of her life by one Dr. Cudmore, a bad man who died a few days ago from the effects of a bullet-wound. He had lived in Tennessee near Irene—he had, in fact, sought her hand in marriage, but in vain. He knew well the whole history of her life. After I was duly installed at Glendale as the heiress of Jerry Grimes, I was to hasten the consummation of our plans by poisoning Uncle Jerry."

"Oh, Lord!" groaned Mr. Gray.

"It was awful," continued the dying penitent, "and I can see it now. I was to take his life by poisoning the air of his bedroom with volatilized arsenic; and in this I should have been successful but for the skill of Dr. Wright. To-day, however, news came from one of Dr. Cudmore's men that all of our intended victims had escaped, and admonishing us to fly. This word was sent to Newbold, and by the time he got over to Glendale and told Mave Conrille and myself, and then got back and ready to leave, it was late—alas! too late."

She spoke with difficulty, her eyes staring wildly into the bearded face of him who supported her.

The two settlers, touched with pity for the fair young thing, endeavored to stop the flow of blood from her wound; but their efforts were in vain. She soon breathed her last in the arms of Mr. Gray. With trembling hand the settler closed the erring girl's eyes, and laid the body down upon the snow.

It was more than two hours before the constable and his party returned; and when they did they came empty-handed.

The fugitives had met with a horrible fate—the vengeance of an inscrutable God. Unable to restrain the mad fury of their team, they were carried rapidly forward, and, suddenly, team, sleigh and all disappeared in an air-hole in the ice where the water was very deep, and the current strong. Both animals and men were sucked down under the ice beyond the reach of human aid; and, having no weapon with which to cut the ice, the constable could do nothing toward recovering the bodies until implements for the purpose could be obtained.

Among those that perished were Newbold and Carew, land-agents, Mave Conrille, the stage-driver, who was a party to the conspiracy, and one other who had been with Dr. Cudmore, and had come to warn the conspirators of their danger.

Thus the fell Destroyer had ended the most vile conspiracy in the history of the State; and Right had triumphed over Wrong.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

GOOD-BY!

THERE was rejoicing at the settlement when Myrtle Gray was returned safely to her friends.

There was rejoicing at Glendale over the escape of Grace Manville, Uncle Jerry's true heir.

There was rejoicing everywhere when it became known that Vagabond Joe was a nephew of the master of Glendale.

Uncle Jerry had always liked Joe, and now the mutual attachment, which had hitherto existed between them, ripened into the devotion of old friends. And in the handsome, womanly face of his niece, Grace Manville, the old man beheld the living image of his dead sister, Ruth.

Despite all his late troubles, Uncle Jerry had no doubt that these two young people were his rightful heirs; and the void in his heart, which the presence of the false heirs could not fill, was now filled to overflowing, and a new life to the old man began.

Mr. Henry Sampson remained a highly honored guest at Glendale during the rest of the winter; and when he left in the spring, he left—a wealthy man. He received one-third of Uncle Jerry's foreign inheritance, by permission and desire of all parties concerned, for the time he had spent, and the dangers he had incurred in hunting up the heirs of Jerry Grimes.

Vagabond Joe, or Richard Kenelm, recovered from his wounds after long weeks of patient nursing; and as soon as he was able to be out, Bildad Meeks, president of the school-board, sent a written apology to him one day, in which he acknowledged that the board was wrong, and that he—Joe—was right. He also stated that, "by these presents, the order expelling him from school is hereby revoked, and you are respectfully requested to return to your books in the village school."

Joe, eager to educate himself, availed himself of the president's polite request, and returned to school, where his presence was hailed with joy and delight by both teacher and scholars.

At time passed on, and Joe and Myrtle grew to man and womanhood, it was noticed that the regard which they had always entertained for each other, deepened into love; and this was eventually sealed upon the altar of married bliss.

Captain Ralph Howard returned home after his adventure in the West, and in the course of time, claimed the hand of Irene Lamar in marriage. But, before this event came off, Irene had it distinctly understood that Uncle Jerry should make his home with them during the remainder of his days. It was a provision very acceptable to the captain, for he loved Uncle Jerry as a father.

We have only to add that peace and quietude had scarcely been restored after the Newbold conspiracy, ere the settlers of Fort Dodge were startled by the horrible intelligence of the massacre of whites at Okibogi and Spirit Lakes by the minions of Ishtahaba. But of this bloody deed, the pen of the historian has long since spoken.

THE END.

HUNDRED EYES.

BY LAUNCE POYNTE.

FEW, perhaps none of our readers, ever heard of Bayam Chingsan, 'Lord of the Hundred Eyes,' and yet he was a general who in his day commanded armies larger than any Napoleon ever handled, half a million men in one army. He was just as real and true a personage as General Grant, Sheridan or Von Moltke, and conquered, in his time, countries as large as France, Germany, Spain and Italy, all put together, with more population than they have to-day, and three times as many rich, cultivated cities as they all possessed when Bayam was alive. True, it

was six hundred years ago, but Bayam belonged to a civilized land where greenbacks were first invented, and where people drank their cup of tea just as respectably as Mrs. Brown, next door, does to-day.

The fact is, Bayam Chingsan, or "Hundred Eyes," was the principal general of Kublai Khan, grandson of Djenghis Khan, the man who conquered almost all Asia in the thirteenth century. Djenghis, as most of our readers know, was a Tartar chief, who united all the Tartars, overran Persia, India, and the north of China, and died just as he was preparing to conquer China proper. His nephew, Baatee Khan, succeeded him, and began to invade Russia, exciting such fear in Europe that the pope sent him an embassy, headed by two friars, Rubruquis and Carpini, to pacify him with presents. Rubruquis died on the journey, but Carpini returned safely to Europe, having been received kindly by the Grand Khan, whose attention was accidentally diverted from Europe.

Kublai Khan was the fourth khan, including Djenghis, and the way we come to know so much about him is that three Venetian merchants, inspired by Carpini's account, traveled all the way to Pekin to see him. Two were brothers, Maffeo and Nicolo Polo, the third, their nephew, the celebrated Marco Polo, who afterward wrote his travels, and who has told us all about the Khan and his great general Hundred Eyes.

Kublai was the greatest and richest king of his time. The city of Pekin, then called Kambalee, was his capital, and it was twice the size of New York to-day. His territories were larger than the United States, and his population nearly four times as numerous. He was the first inventor of greenbacks, and kept an army of a million Tartars in pay.

Under his reign Hundred Eyes completed the conquest of Asia, by taking all China proper and the Malay peninsula, so that his master was the almost undisputed ruler, from the Arctic to the Indian Ocean. Only one prince remained obstinate, one of the original Tartar kings, a cousin of Kublai Khan, named Kaidu, and this prince gave occasion for one of the most romantic incidents of the life of Hundred Eyes.

King Kaidu, whose capital was at Samarcand, was chief of a great tribe of Turcomans, and could bring a hundred thousand cavalry into the field. He was a brave and skillful warrior, and his home was so surrounded and protected by deserts, that Kublai, with all his power, was puzzled how to get at his rebellious cousin. As long as he staid in Turkestan behind the desert of Cobi, Kaidu could not harm Kublai, but when he raided into Persia, as he frequently did, he became as great a nuisance as Sitting Bull is to-day.

Now King Kaidu had, as it happened, a beautiful daughter, so beautiful that all the princes of Asia were in love with her, but one of the most peculiar girls you ever saw.

She inherited from her father a frame of great size and strength, from her mother, a Circassian, the most wonderful eyes in all Asia. It is recorded that she was over six feet high, with a form as perfect as that of the Venus of Milo, that her black hair trailed the ground when she unbound it, and as to her eyes no wild animal's eyes were so beautiful.

These wonderful eyes and her extreme beauty made them call her Aigiar, or "Full Moon," and she was known all over Asia.

But strange to say, Aigiar was much prouder of her strength than of her beauty. She was, indeed, stronger than any man of her tribe, except King Kaidu, and he was so proud of her that he readily granted all she asked.

When Aigiar grew up, she saw that the women of the Tartars had to do all the housework, while their husbands were lazy except in battle or the hunt. She frequently saw the men beating their wives, and Aigiar made up her mind that she would never be beaten by any man, unless he was stronger than she was.

So, when she began to receive proposals of marriage, as she did by the score, she gave them all the same answer, and Kaidu backed her. She said that she would marry no man unless he could conquer her in a wrestling match.

Each suitor was also obliged to bring with him a stake of one hundred war-horses of good breed, against which the princess set an equal number. If the suitor could throw Aigiar fairly, he could marry her and take the hundred horses for her dowry. If he were defeated, he had to lose his own hundred horses and take a solemn oath to return to his own country and never marry any woman at all.

These were, of course, hard conditions, but so wonderful was the beauty of Aigiar that all the young nobles of her father's tribe were eager

to try. Of course, only the richer and stronger ones could afford it, and five chiefs successively offered themselves to Aigiar.

No matter how brave and strong they were, the beautiful giantess was too much for them. Most of them had not a ghost of a chance, and were thrown as if they had been so many children. The strongest had to succumb after a fierce struggle; and Aigiar found herself, at sixteen, the champion of Turkestan, five hundred horses the richer, and no more challengers in her tribe.

Then the fame of Aigiar spread to Persia and India, and princes began to come from far countries to try their luck, all with the same result. Aigiar was always victorious, and began to count her horses by thousands. During all this time, her father continued to defy and annoy Kublai, who, knowing he could not conquer Kaidu without much trouble, sent to invite him to come to Kambalee and be the Grand Khan's guest. This was a favorite maneuver of the great Kublai, by which he managed to keep his tributary kings quiet, without leaving them time to plot against him in their own dominions.

Kublai dispatched, as ambassador to Kaidu, Migam Chingsan, brother to Bayam or Hundred Eyes. Migam was Grand Falconer to the Khan, just as Bayam was Grand Huntsman. Both were remarkable for size and strength, and Bayam especially was renowned for being the strongest man in the Tartar army. Cunning Kublai determined to have two strings to his bow. Migam was to offer his presents to Kaidu, and beg him to come to Kambalee. If Kaidu hesitated or refused, Migam was to ask for the hand of the Princess Aigiar, and it was supposed that he would certainly be able to conquer her by main strength at last. In that case, the Khan would secure a hold on Kaidu through his daughter, and all would be well.

Migam Chingsan was a whole year on the journey from Kambalee to Samarcand, the capital of Kaidu, but he reached there at last, presented his gifts, and delivered Kublai's invitation. The old king was too wary and cautious to refuse or consent at once, and therefore received Migam with great politeness, and kept him detained by evasive replies for a long time.

Meanwhile, he invited the young prince (for Migam was such in his own right) to come out hunting and hawking with him; and on all their expeditions the Princess Aigiar rode with them, entrancing Migam to such an extent, that, like all the rest, he fell over head and ears in love with the beautiful giantess.

Kaidu was quite willing to see the affair go on, as it gave him more time to reflect; so it was three months before Migam mustered courage to demand an answer to his mission, which, he felt, would end his stay. Again Kaidu evaded his request; and yet, when Migam asked the hand of the princess, Kaidu agreed with pleasure to the terms imposed by Aigiar. In fact they had been arranged by father and daughter.

It was settled that Migam should stake a thousand horses, he being a prince of immense wealth, and that if he beat Aigiar, Kaidu was to go to Kambalee, and Aigiar was to marry Migam. If the princess was victorious, Kaidu was to remain unmolested.

At last came the appointed day, and Aigiar made her appearance at the lists to wrestle with the young stranger. All the Tartar women were anxious for his success, for he had become a great favorite on account of his handsome face and figure. Aigiar's ladies in waiting entreated her to wrestle poorly and give the victory to the stranger, but the resolute beauty spurned the offer.

The match between Aigiar and Migam was long and arduous. The Grand Falconer of Kublai was the strongest man Aigiar had ever met, and for nearly an hour the two struggled fiercely for the mastery. They were dressed alike, in close-fitting vests and short drawers of double white cotton, with broad leather belts, and wrestled much in the same style as that now called Greco-Roman, without tricks of tripping. At last, by tremendous effort, the princess lifted Migam from the earth, and threw him fairly on his back. She had won.

Migam, very much crestfallen, but as much in love as ever, departed sorrowfully for the city of Kambalee; and no sooner was he gone than Kaidu determined on war. He knew that the Tartars of Kublai were easily swayed to revolt, and he himself was a grandson of Djenghis Khan. Among the Tartars the descendants of Djenghis are held in as much reverence as the family of Mohammed among the Arabs, and Kaidu counted on many of them joining him, could he be successful at first.

Moreover, the Tartars had a holy city, called

Karakorum, in the south-east of Siberia, once the capital of Djenghis, before he started on his career of conquest. He reflected that, if he could get possession of Karakorum, he would be like an Arab-holder of Mecca, intrenched behind the superstition of the Tartars.

Karakorum was about 800 miles from Samarcand, and Kaidu, collecting sixty thousand of his wild desert horsemen, started on his long raid, and marched so swiftly that he reached the place in forty days. He was so rapid in his movements indeed, that the Grand Khan had no time to collect, out of all his army, more than sixty thousand men to meet him, and these were hastily put under one of the Khan's sons, named Nomogan Khan.

At that time the great Bayam, or Hundred Eyes, had just completed his conquest of China, with an army of six hundred thousand men, and all the troops were scattered over the country, while Bayam himself was at Kambalee.

Fearing a disastrous result, for Kaidu was as great a fighter as Djenghis himself, the emperor dispatched Bayam post-haste to Karakorum, to take command. Before he arrived, however, Nomogan had opened the battle with Kaidu, and a tremendous battle it was.

In those days, the Tartars were very far ahead of the people of Europe in civilization and the art of war. They had a regular organization, beginning with ten men under a sort of sergeant. Ten of these squads were under a captain of a hundred men. Ten companies of a hundred made a sort of regiment, a thousand strong, under a chief, and ten regiments made a division, called a *tomaun*. This word the Tartars use to-day, in counting money, for a sum of ten thousand pieces.

Their armies were mostly of cavalry, and fought very much like our American Indians of the plains, dashing in, full gallop, shooting showers of arrows, and then retreating to entice pursuit, when they turned and charged. Kaidu and Nomogan fought in this manner for several hours, when Kaidu's men began to get the best of it, and Nomogan's people broke and fled toward Karakorum. Immediately, the Turcomans of Kaidu broke and pursued in great disorder, and all seemed lost, when a great shouting was heard among the Tartars.

Like Sheridan at Cedar Creek, Hundred Eyes had just come up, and his presence stopped the rout at once. The news spread fast, and Kaidu found, to his disgust, that his own men had heard the shouts of "Bayam! Bayam!" and were drawing back from the battle. Such was the tremendous influence of the mere name of the conqueror of China. It restored the battle, which was lost, and very soon after Bayam made a general advance, when Kaidu, quite disheartened, began to retreat.

It was not destined, however, that Kaidu should be utterly defeated. Soon after, a parley was called, and Bayam himself came forward, to make to Kaidu nearly the same proposition that had once come from Migam; namely, that he (Bayam) should wrestle for the hand of the Princess Aigiar.

Kaidu, overjoyed, consented, trusting in the valor and strength of his daughter, who had followed him all through the campaign, and only that day had killed three Tartar chiefs single-handed. The princess herself consented with readiness, on condition that, if she beat Bayam, he should give up all his prisoners and horses. If Bayam beat Aigiar, Kaidu agreed to submit to Kublai.

Then out rode the two champions, still in their armor, and Aigiar beheld Hundred Eyes. He was taller than herself, looked stronger, and she began to tremble, for the first time. She had need to. Before she could collect herself, the brawny hero rushed upon her, seized her as if she had been a child, and after a short fierce struggle, dashed her on the grass, conquered at last.

So ended the wars of Kaidu. The old king was so much demoralized by the defeat of his famous Amazon, that he yielded at once. He was treated with great kindness by Kublai, whose mild policy thus secured him the undisputed mastery of all Asia. Hundred Eyes and Aigiar were wedded with great pomp, and Bayam became at once the third man in the empire, second only to Timour Khan, the heir apparent.

After all his victories, the great Kublai suffered one defeat at last in his old age, from a people who, to-day, are growing very prominent in the East—the Japanese. With a strong fleet and a considerable army, the Tartars attempted the conquest of Japan, but were dispersed by shipwreck in a hurricane in the year 1269. Since that day Japan has been independent.

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